

Democratic Republic of Congo



Surviving rape: Voices from the east

The following are a selection of testimonies given to Amnesty International (AI) in 2004 by Congolese rape survivors, human rights activists and medical professionals. They are presented here as part of AI's campaign to obtain greater medical care, justice, social and economic support for rape survivors in DRC. All those interviewed gave permission for their stories to be told. All details which might identify them have been changed. Further information on the mass rape committed by all combatant forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the plight of tens of thousands of rape survivors is given in AI's report, *DRC: Mass rape – time for remedies* (AI Index: AFR 62/018/2004), published in October 2004.

THE MARKET TRADER

Florence is 28 years' old and describes herself as *une petite commerçante*, a small trader. In September 2003 she was one of several people travelling on a minibus through the Rusizi plain in South-Kivu province when they were stopped at a roadblock put in place by an armed political group.

AI researcher: Can you tell me what happened?

Florence: That day we were coming from Bukavu. When we reached N., some soldiers stopped the vehicle and made us get out. When soldiers stop vehicles like that, it's to rob the passengers, but they often take the opportunity to rape the women too. I was with five other women, and we were all raped, there at the side of the road. Then they gathered us together again and told us that they were taking us to their commander. So, like that, we were led off to their camp in the forest. Since there were six of us, when we were presented to the commander, he made the first choice of which woman he would take. Then the other officers made their choice: each officer took a woman. When it's the commander who chose you, the others can't touch you. But when he's had enough of you, he hands you on to others to rape you.

Q: How long were you there?

F: I spent two months there.

Q: Every day like that?

F: Every day. Each day I was raped by two soldiers.

Q: *And then?*

F: Well, when the soldiers were tired with me, I was put into a hut which they used as a kind of prison. There, the prison guards would rape us.

Q: *How long were you in this prison for?*

F: We spent about one month in there.

Q: *Did they feed you?*

F: They gave us haricot beans. We had to cook them ourselves. Only at night time; not during the day.

Q: *Why was that?*

F: So that no smoke could be seen. They were frightened of being spotted and attacked. Most nights, too, some of the soldiers went off, and sometimes they brought back cattle. They might give us the head or the hooves. The meat they kept for themselves. So we ate only once a day. They had their own women with them, too, "free" women you could say, who followed them into the forest and prepared the food for them, but not for us.

Q: *Did those women try to help you in any way?*

F: The women who were there couldn't help us, since they would have been killed on the spot. Even our clothes. They stole our clothes and gave them to their women. There were some women with babies who had been abducted like us. They even stripped the babies of clothing.

Q: *There are children held there?*

F: Yes. Then there are also children they've had with their own women. There was a whole mix of people there, from almost all the countries [of the region].

Q: *How was your health? Did you fall ill during that time?*

F: I fell ill. I was bleeding from my vagina. And the water there smelt really bad. They told me I had an infection.

Q: *What was the most difficult?*

F: For me, the most difficult was each time to be raped by so many different soldiers, every day. And then I was almost entirely naked throughout that time: I had only my panties. For two months. So I had to use a piece of cloth here [over her breasts] to cover myself.

Q: *So you were kept naked. And the others you were with, did they all manage to get away?*

F: I think so. I think they were released. But it was on condition of payment. Someone had to bring them money or goods before they let you go.

Q: *Are you married?*

F: My husband threw me out as soon as I got home. Divorced me. For the moment, I'm on my own.

Q: *How is that? Why did he decide to throw you out?*

F: When I came out from the forest, when I reached the house, he decided to abandon me that same day. Now he has another wife.

Q: *And in the community? your neighbourhood?*

F: There's no respect. Every one of them, even if they see you are on the large side, like me, in good health, they say, "But you've got AIDS, you slept with the soldiers". But I'm worried too: I ask myself, perhaps I have got AIDS. And I've deep pains here, in my lower stomach. I couldn't bear to sleep with a man now. It's as if I have wounds inside me. It hurts so much.

Q: Florence, would you like to tell us anything else?

F: What I would ask is to see how you can help us; to see how you can help us just to stay alive. Because when you don't have a husband, it's as if you are shamed, despised, not considered. For example, I made my living by buying and selling. But now I can't do anything. My children suffer; I have problems. We don't even have a house where we can spend the night. I am asking you to support us morally, to give us courage, to help us have hope once more in life.

THE SCHOOL GIRL

Estelle is 12 years old, from South-Kivu province. At the time of the interview she was being cared for by a Congolese women's human rights organization.

AI researcher: Do you go to school?

Estelle: Before, I went to school, yes. But now I've decided to stay at home.

Q: Would you like to tell us what happened?

E: One day I went to the fields to gather some manioc leaves. I saw a man dressed in camouflage, the uniform that soldiers wear. That man chased after us. We ran away, but I fell and he raped me.

Q: Who was with you?

E: There were two other girls with me.

Q: What happened? Were there people around to help you?

E: I fell over. I cried out and my friends ran off. No-one came to help me.

Q: Did he hurt you? Was he violent?

E: He hurt me. It was bad.

Q: What did you do then?

E: After he'd raped me he left me there. I got up and went back home.

Q: You have your family?

E: I've only got my mum. My father isn't with us anymore.

Q: Where is he?

E: During the war my father fled. He hasn't come back.

Q: And what did your mother do?

E: My mother asked me, "Why didn't you bring back the vegetables?" I burst out crying and I told her what had happened. Afterwards she said, "Come on, we're going to see the doctor".

Q: And what did he do?

E: The doctor said that since this man had raped me, I was no longer normal like the other girls.

Q: That you were no longer normal...!?

E: Yes.

Q: What doctor was this?

E: A doctor at the general hospital.

Q: Did he give you any treatment?

E: He examined me and made up a prescription. But in the meantime my mother had been to see the woman who helps run the [human rights organization]. She talked to the hospital manager and I was sent to another medical clinic [specialising in the treatment of rape victims, supported by an international NGO]. When I went there, the doctor gave me three

packets of medicines and he told me that they had spoken to Mother G, the human rights worker.

Q: *And so you don't go to school at the moment?*

E: I don't feel brave enough to go. The other girls in the neighbourhood make fun of me. They call me the little girl who sleeps with soldiers in the forest. I try to hide.

Q: *Where?*

E: Anywhere.

Q: *Are you afraid?*

E: I'm afraid because people call me names and I can no longer go out, even for a walk. People say I went to the fields to sleep with a soldier.

Q: *When did all of this happen?*

E: In mid-February [2004].

Q: *And who did it, do you know?*

E: I didn't know him. A soldier. I wish these soldiers would all be put in prison. If they arrested them I would have some peace.

Q: *Are you going to come back here, to see Mother G.?*

[NGO interpreter]: She comes here to hide. [To Estelle:] You know you can come here, don't you?

E: ...Even at night I don't sleep. No peace.

Q: *Do you hurt anywhere?*

E: I have stomach pains, down here.

Q: *Can you sleep?*

E: I don't get any sleep.

Q: *Why not?*

E: I have the same dream, now. It's night-time, and I'm doing the laundry. I see soldiers coming and I run, then I wake up. Every night I wake up screaming with this dream. And every time I wake up, I feel so hungry. Each time I want to eat.

[No-one speaks for a moment]

E: My family is poor. I used to go to the fields to collect food. Now that I can't leave the house, how are we going to live?

Q: *Have you any brothers or sisters?*

E: I've two little brothers. I'm the one who went up there to get the vegetables for my little brothers.

[Silence again. Estelle begins to cry, quietly, looking away].

Q: *It's alright to cry...*

E: There's no clean water to drink in the neighbourhood. I'm the one who used to go and find clean water...

Q: *What about your mother?*

E: ...and I've other worries. The water's no good here. You have to go and get it from another place.

Q: *And your mother?*

E: She says nothing. She is always calm. She doesn't speak. I haven't spoken to anyone else. Mum doesn't say anything. She doesn't speak.

Q: *Would you like to speak to someone else?*

E: Yes, but not about being raped by soldiers. I can't tell that to anyone, but for my other problems I want to find someone I can talk to. I've no-one to help me with my studies.

Q: *You would like to go back to school?*

E: If they could arrest the man who raped me, I could go to school, but I've no-one to pay my school fees¹.

Q: *And if they arrested the soldier, what would you do?*

E: If they arrested the soldier who raped me I could go and punch him. Then maybe I'd feel better.

Q: Estelle, we are from an organization that works to stop people committing these crimes. We work to put pressure on governments to bring these people to justice and to help those who have suffered.

E: May God bless you for this work.

Q: We'll tell people what's happened. You can write to me. Just tell Mother G and she can get a message to us.

THE PASTRY SELLER

Before the rape, **Georgette** used to sell pastries.

AI researcher: Would you like to introduce yourself?

G: Yes, I would, because I am happy to be here. It is a great joy for me to meet you, because what you did for me is unforgettable. Anyway, it's a great joy for me.

Q: *What is your name?*

G: I am Georgette M.

Q: *How old are you?*

G: Now I am 27.

Q: *Could you tell us what happened to you?*

G: Well, it is something that can't be told many times, because what happened to me makes me feel... When I remember what happened, it hurts me, it hurts me to my heart. It was in 2000, the second of June 2000. I was 24 at the time. I was going to the funeral of my sister-in-law. While I was on the road -- it ran through the forest -- I met a soldier who ordered me to have sex with him.

Q: *And what happened?*

G: Well, when I refused he raped me. After that he tortured me. I don't know how many bullets he fired at me, because it was many, many...

Q: *He shot you?!*

G: Yes he shot me many times.

¹ The collapse of the state in eastern DRC means that teachers rely on payments from families to survive. Most public servants, including teachers, doctors and nurses, have received no state payment of salary for three years or more. Although "fees" are small, many families still cannot afford them.

Q. *Where?*

G: In my genitals. Then, I was left there until... I spent at least three hours there without any help.

Q. *So this soldier raped you and then he shot you?*

G: Then he ran off. When he ran off I was left there without any help for at least three hours... three hours went by like that. The lady I'd been [walking] with, she came back to find me. So, when she found me, there where she'd left me with the soldier, she picked me up and we went to find other people who could help us. It was around one in the afternoon when I was shot, but I didn't have any help until 4 or 5 o'clock. I woke up in the hospital. There, well they don't even have bandages – there is nothing, absolutely nothing there². But I stayed there... At least, that is, they helped me with my blood, because I was already too...

Q. *You were losing a lot of blood?*

G: Yes, I'd lost a lot of blood. So there, they helped me with that at least, and then they transferred me to the general hospital in Uvira. But there, they couldn't do much for me. I spent three days there. [Then I was] transferred to the Panzi hospital in Bukavu³. There I went through at least four operations, but they didn't work.

Q. *In shooting you, all your internal organs had been destroyed?*

G: All, all my organs. Yes all of them. In any case, everything was messed up inside. There, at Panzi, they tried to repair things but I was left with a problem of a fistula⁴, and nothing could be done. I was permanently incontinent. I couldn't do anything to control myself, to control my urine. So because of that... Well, the doctor at Panzi hospital tried everything possible, but it didn't work.

Q. *You had to have a lot of operations?*

G: Yes, but finally it became clear they couldn't do anything more for me. They suggested that maybe my family could help me. But my family is very poor, especially with all the problems brought on by the war. In any case my family could do nothing – they didn't even have 10 dollars to help me. So I stayed on in Bukavu, hoping for help, looking for someone to help me. Then, through grace, I got to know [a local human rights organization] who got in touch with Amnesty International. Then I heard that you'd accepted to help me. [Then together you helped me get] the further medical care I needed, this was in 2002, and afterwards I came back without any more problems. For that I thank you and I thank the people of Amnesty.

Q. *And today, what would you like to do in the future?*

G: Today? Well, when I came back, I asked myself what can I do? I don't have the strength to run a business. I don't have the strength to go home and work in the fields.

Q. *And you were afraid of going home to your village?*

G: Yes, I was very afraid, too afraid to go back to where it had happened. So I decided to stay here in Bukavu. I asked myself what I could do and the only thing I really wanted to do was to

² The hospital was looted extensively during the conflict. It is now partly rebuilt and re-equipped, with international NGO help, but as with all state health facilities in the east, still lacks essential drugs, equipment and personnel.

³ The Panzi hospital is supported by international NGOs and specialises in medical care for rape survivors. The hospital is able to deal with all but the most complex of surgical cases, although it only has the capacity to treat a fraction of the women who require surgery after rape.

⁴ An internal tear between the anus and vagina. In Georgette's case this was complicated by a largely destroyed uterus and urethra.

study. I'd wanted to study for such a long time. And then last year I met someone who was able to help me to resume my studies.

Q. *What do you study? What do you want to be?*

G: If I can get my state diploma, I want to practise medicine, nothing else.

Q. *You want to become a doctor?*

G: Yes [she laughs, shyly].

Q. *Why?*

G: Eh? Why? Because after everything that I've been through, I felt... well, I want to help others. I've passed through so many hospitals; I've met so many people who wanted to help me... So because of that I want so much to help others, too. Because of the problems I've had, that's why.

Q. *We wish you good luck. And what do you wish for the women of Congo who have suffered?*

G: I wish for them to be helped, because I've known so many women who were raped but who have had no help. No help at all. In any case, when I see them I feel uncomfortable because, well, you see, I had the fortune to have someone who could help me, but when I go to the hospital and meet all those women who are going through such pain, it makes me sad. For these, I can only wish that the women of Congo be helped because they have suffered so much. Yes. Help especially with medical care.

In July 2004 Georgette passed her state diploma, her first step towards a medical qualification.

MOTHER AND BABY

Elizabeth is 19 years' old. She comes with her two-month-old baby daughter.

Q. *Why did you come to see us today?*

E. I came to explain to you the problems I'm having with my baby.

Q. *And what is your baby's name?*

E. Clarice.

Q. *What happened?*

E. It was on 27 May last year, 2003. I was on my way to the fields with three other girls when we ran into some soldiers coming down from the interior.

Q. *Where was this?*

E. Up on the plateau above the town. They took all of us by force. We couldn't defend ourselves - they raped us. They were violent: they had guns and they were on their way down here to fight. That's when I became pregnant with this child.

Q. *Did they threaten you?*

E. Yes. We couldn't do anything. We tried to push them away but some of them held guns to our heads. One of them told me, "If you carry on like that, I'll blow your head off".

Q. *How many of them were there?*

E. There were eight of them. They took it in turns to rape me and the other girls.

Q. *How long did they keep you?*

E. It lasted a long time. Each soldier took as long as he wanted.

- Q. *Did you recognise them?*
 E. No. They were soldiers, that's all I know.
- Q. *After they raped you, did anyone come to help?*
 E. No, there was no one around. We had to stay there until nightfall. Then other soldiers came, a patrol from the town, and they brought us back.
- Q. *Why did you have to stay there for so long?*
 E. We were very weak after the attack, and we were afraid that we might meet other soldiers on the road.
- Q. *Do you have pains?*
 E. Pain in my stomach, in my back, through my left leg. I got some pills. The pains got worse after I gave birth.
- Q. *And so you gave birth in January? February?*
 E. Yes, February. In June I noticed I had no period, and I knew I was already pregnant. The others told me to have an abortion⁵ but I couldn't do that.
- Q. *And how is the baby?*
 E. She's suffering from constipation.
- Q. *Are you married?*
 E. No I'm not married.
- Q. *Have you been back to the fields since?*
 E. No, I've been too frightened.
- Q. *So how do you manage to support yourself and Clarice?*
 E. Up to now I've been staying with my mother and we both look after the child. My mother buys manioc and grinds it into flour to sell at market.
- Q. *And how did people react to the baby?*
 E. My neighbours, those around me, they said "You're going to give birth to an enemy". But when they saw it was a girl, they said, "God be thanked, because a girl will get married. A girl won't fight against us." But I still hear them saying things. I don't know what I should do. If I had the means, perhaps I'd have gone somewhere else, but I had to stay here. And I'm frightened for my future, for my tomorrow. I was a student before, but now I can't go back to school and I don't know how I'm going to survive. I don't sleep at night. I lie awake. When I hear the baby crying I start crying too.
- Q. *Apart from your mother, has anyone helped you?*
 E. A local human rights organization gave me a dollar, listened to me, but apart from that, just my mother. I ask her to tell the neighbours to stop saying these things about me and my baby, to explain to them that what happened wasn't my fault.
- Q. *And the other girls, what happened to them? Do you still speak to them?*
 E. They understand. They don't blame me. They haven't had babies. All of us were ill: they had pains too, and difficulty in standing.

⁵ Illegal in DRC, even in rape cases. Many women accept the life-threatening risks of seeking abortions from traditional healers, often using unhygienic practices and equipment.

THE ACTIVIST

My name is Bernadette. I work with a local women's organization here. I'm in charge of the counselling section. Our organization works to protect and promote human rights, more particularly women's and children's rights. Since we started, we've supported and listened to more than 900 women. We work in practically all the areas around here, but we face many difficulties.

We try to listen to the women and advise them as best we can. Not only women who've been raped, but women who've been victim of all forms of sexual violence. We run three refuges or reception centres. There are women who have to walk from miles away to see us, who lack money for transport. Sometimes they are very ill, but still they come on foot, sometimes two or three days' walk. And when they get to us, sometimes we lack basic essentials to give them: soap, food, clothing... Some stay with us, because close to our refuge at B. is the only hospital [run by an international organization] where there is decent medical help.

We listen to the women, try to help them psychologically, help them to get medical care, and we try to give them a small amount of money, because typically the soldiers who rape the women will also take everything they own, even down to their clothes and cooking pots. And many women have been rejected by their husbands and are left on their own to look after the children, to find shelter and food for them. Many of the children are badly undernourished. So we try to give them something, when we have it, so they can start up again on their own: a small amount so they can buy and sell food at the markets and make a little profit, or some seed or a hoe.

But there are many problems. Even though they say the war is over, I can tell you it is still here. There are many villages where the women are not assisted, are abandoned to themselves. And the women are scared. Our own workers receive threats too. Two weeks ago, as I was on my way to K., I was threatened by three soldiers who said that we exaggerate the rapes and tried to take the documents I was carrying. They are worried that we are divulging all their secrets. We are regularly called in for questioning. We don't keep our files here. We send them to G., for security.

And at the personal level, sometimes when I'm in the middle of listening to a woman, sometimes I feel it is all too much, when the woman speaks of her problems, how she was raped, how her family have rejected her. Sometimes several women will try and talk to me all at once, pouring out their problems, their needs. Me too, I feel traumatized.

That's why I want to ask the international community to come to our assistance. We need training and reinforcement. We need health centres that have the proper drugs. We need more reception centres, because so many women have to come from far away and if we had more, we could help more women in their communities. Here at B, we have five rooms, and yet we often have 15 or 20 women arriving at once. It's not enough. And I also ask our own government to begin to punish the rapists, because as long as the rapists are left undisturbed, we can't repair the moral and psychological damage and the women won't have the courage to look forward.

THE NURSE

Gilbert is a nurse in charge of a state health centre in a rural district of South-Kivu province. The health centre normally serves a population of around 9,000, but with the conflict has found itself inundated with patients from neighbouring zones whose health centres have been destroyed. At the time of AI's visit the health centre's pharmacy was almost bare. The health centre treats childbirth cases and a range of illnesses, from minor ailments to other potentially more serious sexually transmitted infections or diseases such as malaria. Its patients include many victims of rape. The most serious cases are referred to the nearest hospital, several kilometres away, which is itself functioning on only minimal resources.

Q. What are you building here?

G. This will be our new maternity block.

Q. To keep the mothers separate?

G. Yes, [laughing] so that no-one can hear their cries! It's to keep them away from other infections.

Q. Where did you get the bricks?

G. I spoke to the local school-teacher and he got the children to make some and bring them in, and others from the community helped as well. But we haven't got roof-tiles or any doors yet. Maybe in a few months...

Q. What was it like here during the fighting?

G. We had many problems. The centre was looted many times over by soldiers. There were more patients here during that time because the other health centres in the zone were not functioning. When the fighting came really close, we had to flee. There were even times when we heard shooting, patients fled with transfusion drips still hanging from their arms. The first soldiers to come looted everything they could carry off: mattresses, microscopes... The only thing that saved the centre was that we have a lot of material that is too heavy to transport, but we lost all equipment that was in any way portable.

Q. And how many people do you treat here?

G. On average we receive around 1,000 patients every month, so we treat 30 or more people a day.

Q. Do you have enough medicine for them?

G. No. We receive basic medicines from an international NGO, but it's not enough. They give us what they consider a month's supply, but it only lasts 20 days. For the remaining 10 days I have to beg and borrow what I can. After speaking to you, I have to give some patients quinine. I should do it by transfusion, but I have to give them it orally in small doses, which isn't as effective. But it's a question of making do; a question of "war medicine".

Q. Do patients have to pay?

G. We have a single tariff here: everyone pays 100 francs⁶ whatever the treatment they need.

⁶ Around \$0.25. The vast majority of Congolese live on around \$0.20 per day. The closest general hospital charges about \$1 for out-patient care, slightly less than \$2 for child admissions and nearly \$2.50 for adult admissions. In some other locations a consultation with a doctor (without treatment) will cost around \$1.50 or with a nurse around \$0.50. For most people, accessing health care is either unaffordable or requires making unacceptable choices between, for example, health and children's education (where fees are also demanded) or sale of essential family assets such as livestock.

Q. *And do you receive a state salary?*

G. No. Ha! That, no, not for a long time. What's more, we've so few staff here and you can see how many patients we get. I'm the head nurse, and there are times when I haven't been able to leave the centre for five straight days: eating here, sleeping here, because of the number of patients. But we get nothing from the government. We work really hard to cure our brothers and sisters, but we have nothing. As I'm speaking to you, it's already four in the afternoon, and I haven't eaten since early this morning. If there was a way that the government, the international community could come to our aid... they should come.

Q. *You have children?*

G. Me, yes. I'm a father of five. I have to pay \$1 per month school fees for each of them, so you can see how it is.

Q. *So what would you say to the government, to the international community?*

G. Come and see how it is for yourselves. Come and see what you can do to help us and how to begin to pay us and get us the medicines and equipment we need. Because we've been a long time like this...