



Amnesty International Press Release
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
Tuesday, April 13, 2010

Amnesty International Presents Its 2010 Ginetta Sagan Award to Congoese Woman Fighting the War-Fueled Epidemic of Sexual Assault

**Sheltering Sexual Assault Survivors, the Majority Adolescents, and Their Children,
Rebecca Masika Katsuva Has Been Repeatedly Assaulted, Threatened**

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(New Orleans) – Rebecca Masika Katsuva, a survivor of multiple sexual assaults who has used her meager resources to shelter and defend the rights of other survivors including children in the South Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), was honored by Amnesty International USA, receiving the 2010 Ginetta Sagan Award for Women’s and Children’s Rights. at the organization’s annual national gathering in New Orleans April 9-11.

Katsuva was unable to attend the organization's annual national gathering in New Orleans April 9-11 where the award is traditionally given but received it in absentia.

Katsuva and her daughters were raped, and her husband killed, by combatants in Congo’s long-running civil war in 1998. The following year, Katsuva began a “listening house” for women like her, in her home in an isolated, conflict-ridden region of South Kivu, far from urban medical aid and legal protections. She began taking women and children into her home to rebuild their lives. In 2002, she renamed her organization the Association des Personnes Desherites Unies pour le Development (APDUD). Today, the Association has helped nearly 6,000 women, finding them medical care, sheltering them in nearly 50 houses built by the Association, which is supported by a communal farm. Assault survivors may give birth and raise their children at the Association. When possible, women are reunited with their families. Katsuva shares survivors’ stories with human rights workers, international organizations, and anyone else who might be able to help end the sexual assaults and impunity of combatants and officials. Her outspokenness led to a January 2009 rape, the fourth Katsuva has endured. Because of her reputation as a fearless truth-teller, her life is in constant danger.

Katsuva has several plans for the \$10,000 grant that is part of the Ginetta Sagan Award. “I’m going to use this money first to open a bank account, because I can’t keep \$10,000 here at the house due to insecurity. Secondly, I think that I will buy a house in Goma to rent, so that each month I will get some rent money that I can use to pay school fees for all children I’ve taken into my home. The rest of the money I will use to clothe, feed and otherwise take care of my children and the women I have taken into my home,” says Katsuva, who has adopted 18 children of assault.

Larry Cox, executive director of Amnesty International USA, said: “This heartbreaking story illustrates the heights and depths of human beings. Rebecca has endured the cruelest of indignities to her physical and emotional health, and she has responded with a conviction and compassion for other survivors that demonstrates the best that human beings can accomplish. Her determination, strength, creativity and accomplishments are incredible testaments to one woman’s ability to make a tangible and positive change among chaos and insecurity.”

The Ginetta Sagan Award, named for the late Presidential Medal of Freedom winner and longtime Amnesty International activist, recognizes women who devote their lives to ending human rights abuses against women and children.

Congo has been consumed by fighting for nearly two decades. The conflict has taken more than 5.4 million lives since 1998, according to the International Rescue Committee, with as many as 45,000 new deaths every month. Millions more have been injured, displaced, impoverished and traumatized.

An epidemic of rape has left tens of thousands of women, the majority under the age of 18, dead, disabled, traumatized and often pregnant. The United Nations Population Fund estimates that more than 8,000 women were sexually assaulted in 2009 alone. Assaulted women, and the children born of those assaults, are often rejected by their families and communities.

“Katsuva’s endurance, despite harassment, attacks and constant danger, should inspire the global community to do everything possible to bring Congo’s violence to an end,” says Julianne Cartwright Traylor, co-chair of the Ginetta Sagan Fund and former Chair of the Amnesty International USA Board of Directors.

“The assaults on women in Congo make it not only the world’s bloodiest conflict since World War II, but also one of the cruelest in its targeting of women and adolescents, and the innocent children of violence,” said Andrea Damesyn Claburn, a close friend of Ginetta Sagan and co-chair of the Ginetta Sagan Fund.

About the Ginetta Sagan Fund

Established as a living memorial to the late human rights activist and prominent Amnesty International USA member Ginetta Sagan, whose lifelong work began with the Italian resistance during World War II, the fund annually bestows an award of \$10,000 to recognize and assist a woman doing effective work to protect the dignity, liberties and lives of women and children in crisis regions where abuse of human rights is widespread. The award recognizes outstanding achievement, often at great personal risk; enhances the recipient’s ability to live and work freely; protects her capacity to continue her work, and brings increased international scrutiny an issue or the crisis region where the recipient works. Please visit us at www.amnestyusa.org/ginettasaganfund for more information about previous winners.

Amnesty International is a Nobel Peace Prize-winning grassroots activist organization with more than 2.2 million supporters, activists and volunteers in more than 150 countries, campaigning for human rights worldwide. The organization investigates and exposes abuses, educates and mobilizes the public, and works to protect people wherever justice, freedom, truth and dignity are denied. Please visit www.amnestyusa.org for more information.

Biography

Rebecca Masika Katsuva

2010 Recipient of Amnesty International USA's Ginetta Sagan Award for Women's and Children's Rights

Rebecca Masika Katsuva, a survivor of an epidemic of sexual assault in the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), is fighting back by sheltering other women survivors, and the children born of their violation, while working to end the impunity of officials and fighters who use rape as a weapon of war.

Katsuva has endured four sexual assaults. In 1998, attackers killed Katsuva's husband, and then violated her -- on top of her late husband's remains -- and her daughters, then 9 and 13. Katsuva and her daughters, who became pregnant as a result of the assaults, were disowned by her late husband's relatives and forced to leave their home.

In 1999, Katsuva began a *centre d'ecoute* (also known as a *maison d'ecoute* or listening house) in her home. Listening houses have sprung up around eastern Congo to act as shelters for violated women. Katsuva's is unusual in being run by a woman survivor and in its location in an isolated and conflict-ridden area, far from the hospitals and legal protection available in urban areas.

In 2002, Katsuva renamed her center the Association des Personnes Desherites Unies pour le Development (APDUD). The association is a safe place for women to recover and seek medical help. Almost 50 houses have been constructed for women to occupy while rebuilding their lives. When possible, Katsuva reunites assault victims with their families. "Each woman has her own specific problem and when we're together, we discuss each issue and find solutions," she says.

Katsuva took another unusual step by welcoming other women and girls into her home to live and work together. She has adopted 18 children, born from sexual assaults on other girls and women. Katsuva's own heartache spans three generations: Her mother helped with the Association's work, until she, too, was raped and killed.

Today, some 180 women support the Association by selling the yam and cassava they grow on a communal garden. "We know if we ask you for food, tomorrow we will be hungry, but we have hands and we can work," Katsuva says. "We have suffered but now we are strong and we are harvesting food."

The Association has assisted nearly 6,000 rape victims. Katsuva actively seeks out rape victims in remote locations, even carrying the weakest on her back to safety.

In January 2009, former insurgents, newly integrated into the Congo military, came looking for Katsuva. They raped her (the fourth she has survived), and beat her, leaving her with scars on her neck, pains in her back, and swollen wrists. The former insurgents said they attacked Katsuva specifically because she had so often accused them of assaulting women.

Despite the constant possibility of another attack, Katsuva tells her story, and the stories of the women who seek help from the Association, to journalists, non-governmental organizations,

human rights workers, and anyone else she believes might be able to help her fight for an end to impunity for crimes against women, reform of Congo's justice system and a future when life in Congo will be safe for women again. The goal is still far away, and the cell phone hanging around Katsuva's neck constantly rings with new pleas for help.

"I have thought about ending my life many, many times," Katsuva says. "But then I see the children I have and the women who need support and I stop myself."