

Defending Women, Fighting Rape

IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Human Rights Defender at Risk: *Justine Masika Bihamba*

“When I see the women come to me in search of hope, I say to myself, I must continue to struggle.”

Justine Masika Bihamba



Human rights defenders working to end violence against women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) do so in the face of grave threats of violence against themselves and their families. Justine Masika Bihamba coordinates Synergy of Women for Victims of Sexual Violence (Synergie des femmes contre les violence sexuelles), a women’s human rights organization working in the DRC. Synergy provides services to victims of sexual violence, and has drawn attention to the increasing incidence of rape in the North Kivu region. Synergy counselors have been threatened and attacked because of their work.

On September 18, 2007, six men, reportedly army soldiers, broke into Justine’s house in Goma when she wasn’t there, and tied up her six children at gunpoint. Justine’s 21-year-old daughter pleaded with the soldiers to take what they wanted but not to hurt anyone. A soldier replied that they had not come to steal anything, but rather were on a “well-defined mission.” The men searched the house. A soldier kicked Justine’s 24-year-old daughter in the face, breaking her tooth, and sexually assaulted another daughter.

When Justine returned home during the attack, the men fled. Justine and her children identified to the military police the soldiers who were involved in their attack, but the military police refused to arrest the men, claiming there was no evidence against them.

Nine days after the attack, Justine lodged a legal complaint against the soldiers. In the following weeks and months, senior military and civilian authorities promised that justice would be done, but more than a year later, the suspects have still not been arrested or brought to trial. Justine and her children have reportedly been threatened repeatedly by the men, whom they see in the streets around their home. Justine’s five-year-old son now fears he will be killed whenever he sees a soldier. Her two daughters have fled abroad for their safety.



BACKGROUND

The conflict in the DRC is widely attributed as one of the bloodiest since World War II, where rape and sexual violence are endemic. Increasingly, rape has become a weapon in this conflict. Armies and militias target the women and girls of “enemy” populations, in an effort to destroy the families and the communities. Soldiers and police, as well as Congolese and foreign armed group members, are among the main perpetrators. Over the last few years, an increasing number of sexual attacks by civilians have also been reported. Many rapes, particularly those committed by armed groups, involve genital mutilation or other extreme brutality. Some groups also abduct girls and women as sex slaves.

Few perpetrators of sexual violence are brought to justice. In 2006, a new law was introduced to strengthen judicial procedures and penalties for crimes of sexual violence, but it has not been widely implemented. Rape survivors are stigmatized, suffering social and economic exclusion. Few have access to adequate medical care. The continuing rape crisis is part of a broader pattern of violence and endemic discrimination against women in the DRC.

Congolese women are fighting back, through organizations such as Synergie of Women for Victims of Sexual Violence. They need our help in this struggle.

SPEAK OUT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS!

Call on President Joseph Kabila to conduct a full and impartial investigation into the attack on Justine Masika Bihamba’s family, including the sexual assault of her daughter. Urge him to ensure that the perpetrators are promptly brought to justice. Ask him to provide immediate protection for Justine and her family and to ensure that human rights defender can carry out their work free from threats and harassment. Write to:

President Joseph Kabila
Cabinet du Président
Palais de la Nation
Kinshasa/Gombe
République Démocratique du Congo
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Email: cabinet_president@yahoo.fr
Salutation: Your Excellency
Airmail postage: 94 cents

SEND A MESSAGE OF SOLIDARITY

You can let Justine know that she is not alone in her struggle. You can send solidarity cards to the Synergie Headquarters, letting Justine know she, her fellow human rights defenders, and the women of the DRC are not alone or forgotten. These cards, like the flame of the Amnesty candle, often provide renewed hope.

Please send cards of support to Synergie in care of their postal address in Rwanda, which is more reliable than sending mail directly to the DRC. Mail to:

Synergie des Femmes pour les Victimes des Violences
Sexuelles
B.P.227
Gisenyi
RWANDA

Airmail postage: \$0.94