

Amnesty International USA
16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence:
Let's Challenge Militarism and End Violence Against Women
(25 November – 10 December 2013)

**Democratic Republic of Congo:
Protect Women Human Rights Defenders**

For almost two decades, armed conflict has continued in the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) (DRC), especially in the eastern provinces. Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) have provided grassroots assistance to civilians, but **their work causes them to face imminent threats of violence.**

Civilians face persistent human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law, **ranging from unlawful killings, rape and sexual violence, and arbitrary detentions to indiscriminate attacks, intimidation, and looting.** The increased hostilities and militarism—particularly since mid-2012 with the creation of the armed group known as M23 and the proliferation of other armed groups—has greatly exacerbated the difficulties these activists face. Defenders face increasing intimidation and are often subjected to arbitrary arrests, disappearances, or death threats by state security forces, the M23, and unidentified armed men, severely hindering their work.

Due to the increase in abuses [against the civilian population](#) caused by hostilities between the national army and armed groups, the role of human rights non-governmental organizations is even more valuable to communities under threat. Women HRDs who work in areas controlled or affected by active armed groups offer assistance to victims of human rights abuses who do not have adequate access to public services, including reliable and effective police and justice systems to seek redress and accountability for the abuses. Victims often go to human rights organizations to denounce abuses against them and to seek psycho-social, medical, and legal assistance. The breakdown of state authority and official services, as well as the prevalence of rape and sexual violence by armed groups and elements of the national army, create a climate of insecurity among women in general, and a particularly acute climate of fear among those women who denounce cases of sexual violence.

There have also been several grave cases of WHRDs threatened for carrying out their work of denouncing and assisting victims of sexual violence, who, as a result, subsequently faced the possible threat or act of sexual violence. One WHRD based in North Kivu province explained that **members of the Congolese army visited her office in March 2013 and threatened to kill her if she continued to denounce cases of rape and sexual violence committed by the national army.**



(A woman of Bompata Encampment, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Photo ID 164605. 11/03/2007. Bompata, DRC. UN

Women HRDs in eastern DRC generally do not have adequate networks, face a lack of education and training in methodology, and are deprived of the visibility of their male counterparts. One activist told Amnesty that they have a tendency to feel forgotten, despite all the work they are doing.

[WHRDs need adequate protection](#) mechanisms and welcoming environments, supported by reliable police and judicial services. Visibility of the situations faced by WHRDs has recently increased, but they still do not receive sufficient recognition and support.

At the UN General Assembly in September 2013, 133 states supported the [Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict](#). The declaration includes a commitment to “encouraging, supporting and protecting the efforts of civil society organizations, including women’s groups and human rights defenders, to improve the monitoring and documentation of cases of sexual violence in conflict without fear of reprisal and empower victims to access justice.” This commitment must lead to an improved situation for WHRDs in eastern DRC.

Amnesty International is working to raise the awareness of members of the Congolese government and diplomatic representation in DRC of the important role played by WHRDs, particularly in zones affected by armed conflict and with high rates of violence against women. Women’s rights activists must receive more support from both within the country and beyond.

Take Action Now!

You can stand with these human rights defenders! There are three ways to take action today!

1. Solidarity Action with several WHR organisations in eastern DRC

Send your messages of support to women’s organizations working in North and South Kivu! Email your message of support to show that these courageous activists do not stand alone! Write a short email message of support—you can express your solidarity and thank them for their work. Or, you can take a picture of yourself holding a message of support (possible messages might include “You are not alone!” “We stand with you!” “Do not give up hope- you are not forgotten!”).

Email messages of support to drcsolidarityaction@gmail.com & cc sophie.rosenberg@amnesty.org where the messages will be compiled and sent by e-mail or post, depending on the organizations.

2. Write a Letter to the Minister of Gender, Family and Child, Geneviève INAGOSI urging her to defend human rights defenders:

Model Letter

Address:

Ministre Geneviève INAGOSI KASSONGO
Ministère du Genre, Famille et L’Enfant
2614, Boulevard du 30 juin
Kinshasa-Gombe
République démocratique du Congo

Dear Minister,

I write to express my deep concern about the situation for human rights defenders, particularly women human rights defenders, in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Amnesty International has documented numerous cases of intimidation, death threats, arbitrary detentions, ill-treatment, and unlawful killings of human rights defenders throughout the DRC. The weakness of state infrastructure and the prevalence of rape and sexual violence in the eastern provinces by armed groups and elements of the national army exacerbate the climate of insecurity for women human rights defenders.

We note your extensive report published by the Ministry of Gender in October 2013 on the extent of sexual violence in DRC between 2011 and 2012. You stress the high rate of sexual violence in areas of armed conflict, citing approximately 7,000 cases in North Kivu in 2012. Amnesty International has interviewed dozens of women human rights defenders who document cases of sexual violence and provide psychological, social, and legal assistance to many such survivors of sexual violence.

It is worrying that these activists in North Kivu have been broadly forced to stop their monitoring activities, operate clandestinely, or risk their life for reporting abuses committed by both armed groups and elements of the national security forces. Many women human rights defenders told Amnesty International that they cannot return home as they have been identified as a 'human rights activist' in their towns and fear reprisals. One woman human rights defender based in Bweremana, North Kivu province explained that members of the FARDC visited her office in early March 2013 and threatened to kill her if she continued to report cases of rape and sexual violence. If human rights defenders can't speak up, then the whole community is at risk.

There are currently no active state initiatives that provide effective support to human rights defenders in North Kivu. Rather than being perceived as a threat by state elements, women human rights defenders should be seen as partners in your objective to eliminate violence against women and to seek justice and reparations for survivors.

Amnesty International is also concerned that, one year later, there has been very slow progress in the investigation and prosecution of suspected perpetrators of the widespread rape and sexual violence that occurred in Minova, South Kivu in late November 2012, reportedly by members of the armed forces. There is a dire need for justice for this crime: impunity fosters cycles of violence and violations and prevents survivors and their families from gaining accountability and reparations.

Activists around the globe are calling on world leaders to address abuses faced by women in militarized zones and are marking 29 November 2013 as the International Women Human Rights Defender Day. Amnesty International joins the calls by Congolese women's groups to ask you to:

- Call for the prosecution of those responsible for the widespread sexual violence in Minova in late November 2012 to progress without undue delay and in accordance with fair trial standards.

- Increase your engagement with women human rights defenders, including through genuine and regular consultations, and publicly acknowledge the role of women human rights defenders in areas of armed conflict as allies in the struggle against gender-based violence.
- Ensure state initiatives that would support human rights defenders, such as the Liaison Entity, the Protection Cell for human rights defenders, and the National Commission for Human Rights are activated and implemented throughout the DRC.

Sincerely,

3. Tweet in Solidarity and to Demand Action!

In addition to letter writing, tweet your support to Women's Human Rights Defenders in the DRC and ask the Minister of Gender, Family and Child to take action. Here are some sample tweets:

- #DRC WHRDs I acknowledge your brave & difficult work and send my message of solidarity #16days bit.ly/Amnesty16days @AmnestyWomenRts
- Protect #humanrights defenders like in #DRC! #16days bit.ly/Amnesty16days @AmnestyWomenRts
- Geneviève Inagosi, Ministre – please protect, recognize and support #women #humanrights defenders in the #DRC #16days @AmnestyWomenRts

Questions? Please email us at whr@aiusa.org!

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