

## Raped women used as pawns in Congo war

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## Rape victims speak for end to violence

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- The U.N. says more than 15,000 women were raped in the eastern Congo last year
- It accuses militias and Congolese military
- Women tell CNN how they were "taken into the forest" -- a euphemism for sexually assaulted
- Doctor says: Rape is not only a weapon but it's kind of a strategy of war

**Katana, Democratic Republic of Congo (CNN)** -- Quiet, remote and beautiful villages have become the scene for unspeakable horror as women are raped as a weapon in war.

Violence in the democratic Republic of Congo is brutal and that includes armed gangs raping and killing.

A United Nations report said that in the last year more than 15,000 women were raped in the east of the Congo, but even the U.N. admits that is a conservative estimate.

Katana village is 30 minutes from Bukavu, the regional capital of South Kivu, just off the main road leading out of town.

It is one of the few "good roads," but turn off it and the track very quickly becomes little more than a footpath.

Poor infrastructure and the ever-present threat of violence have isolated this community, as they have done to rural communities throughout eastern Congo.

Both militias and Congolese troops move through this area.

The U.N. report accused Rwandan and Congolese militias, and the Congolese military, of violence against civilians and mass rape. Congo's defense minister has denied its soldiers were involved.

Regardless of who bears ultimate responsibility, the reality appears to be that nowhere is safe. The phrase "taken into the forest" has become a euphemism for sexual assault.

In Katana, Catholic priests have set up a trauma center dispensing medicine and counseling to local rape victims.

It is difficult for women to reach the main hospital, especially after an attack, so now at least they know there is somewhere they can get help.

One of the women, Tina Manajera, agreed to speak with CNN. She said she wanted "to be brave."

"The Rwanda militiamen came at night, everyone ran away, even my husband. But I don't blame him. That's all you can do when they come, try and run for your life."

Tina said she watched as eight other women were dragged out from their hiding places, as the militiamen ransacked the village.

She said they were led into the forest at gunpoint and when their attackers stopped for the night, they took turns raping the women.

"When it happens you lose consciousness because you're so afraid. I came to only as I was passed from man to man."

Rape carries a huge stigma in Congo. Many of the women at the center told CNN their husbands had left them because they were "Rwandan rebel wives."

Tina said she wanted to tell her story. She said: "The pain makes you brave."

"I am in pain every day. I would do anything to change that. Maybe if I tell you what happened to me other people out there in the world will hear and they can do something to make us safe, to make the pain go away."

In Bukavu, hospital doctors have a special unit dedicated to sexual violence.

Dr. Denis Mukwegi, the medical director at Panzi Hospital, said in the 20 years he's been a gynecologist at Panzi, they've treated around 25,000 women, many with severe sexual trauma. Currently, he says, they are seeing around 10 women a day

He said: "Rape is used as a weapon. It's not only a weapon but it's kind of a strategy of war.

"The way that they are raping women in front of their own husbands, their neighbors, I think that all this strategy is to bring women to get ashamed, their husbands to get ashamed, to humiliate them and in this condition they have no choice."

At Kahungu, another village in South Kivu, villagers outside their local church when CNN visited. There had been an attack the previous day and they had slept in the forest, afraid to return to their homes.

Noella M'bushugu said: "They arrived at night, they didn't even steal. They went straight to my husband, killed him and then hit me over the head and then stripped me naked. Then they took me into the forest."

Two days later, there were reports of another attack in Kahungu.