

Army Tries Soldiers Accused of Kasugho Attack

Author: [IWPR ICC](#)

Stores were looted and women raped as aggrieved troops wreaked mayhem. The army of the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC, says it has begun trying some of the soldiers accused of a five-day orgy of rape and pillage in a small town in the east of the country, one of a string of such incidents in the war-torn region.

A civil society group that has investigated the case says soldiers who had not been paid plundered more than 60 per cent of the shops in the town of Kasugho and raped 25 women in the incident last October.

Long after it was over, signs are now emerging that the authorities are taking action against the culprits, who at first were seen roaming free in the town, though details of the trials are sketchy.

Sexual violence committed by warring factions has become endemic in the eastern DRC and the number of women raped in the area topped 8,000 last year, according to estimates released by the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, on February 9.

The attack on Kasugho began when soldiers based in the town began firing heavy and light weapons to scare away residents and traders, the Association of Literate People for the Promotion of Lubero said. Kasugho was busy with the weekly Thursday market that attracts people from a wide area and the troops stole goods to sell at a market that takes place in their own camp.

They moved on to the shopping centre, breaking down doors to gain access to the businesses, and plundered them, the association said.

The troops later turned their attention to residential areas where frightened residents had fled, stealing their property, then began beating and raping victims in their homes, the association said.

The raids continued for four more days until the authorities in the nearby town of Lubero transferred the soldiers' overdue pay.

The UNFPA report said most of the rapes in the region were committed by the rebel Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda but it also cited soldiers of the government army, known by its French acronym FARDC, as responsible for many.

The pressure group Human Rights Watch issued a report in December documenting attacks on civilians in eastern Congo and urging the army to ensure the abuses are stopped. It called for perpetrators to be punished and for soldiers to be paid properly to discourage looting.

Among the Kasugho rape victims were three girls in their last year of secondary school. One of them wept as she told her story, "They came in while we were trying to rescue our exercise books and some schoolbooks. They terrorised us. They told us not to shout and to go to our beds. We started shouting but nobody came to help us. There were three of them and they dragged us when we resisted. We regret what

people now say about us.”

A schoolteacher at Bas Musindi school who was badly beaten and raped in front of her young brother said, “They found us in the kitchen and beat us when we tried to get away. They told my brother to undress me but he refused and was beaten. There were four of them; two were busy with my brother while the others were molesting me. When I see them on the street, I start crying. It has been terrible.”

After the ordeal, officials came from the town of Lubero to offer their regrets. The people of Kasugho were shocked, however, that they had paid the price for the delay in paying the soldiers while the rapists were walking around freely.

Kasugho, where people live mainly by farming crops like manioc and beans, has not had a happy history, says village chief Kambere Sikuli Mbuyiro.

“Several mai-mai militiamen had made the village their headquarters. That was damaging to our economic and social progress. Now bizarrely the so-called government army does the same. It is as if we are meant to pay the soldiers,” he said.

There have been reports of disaffected soldiers committing similar raids on other places in the area including Kanyabayonga, not far away. Kasugho has been largely quiet since the October raid.

Local health chief Mumbere Kandoli warned of the risk of infection for rape victims and called on them to report to the authorities, even if they did not want to give evidence against the rapists. People should offer them help to get over their trauma, he said. The authorities had been able to give them little assistance.

The Association of Literate People for the Promotion of Lubero condemned what it called inaction on the part of the provincial authorities in Goma in the case and called for justice to be done.

A district spokeswoman said an operation was under way to ensure that all those responsible for the attack were brought before a court martial.

An army spokesman, Major Vianney Kazarama, asked about the allegations, said there was zero tolerance for such actions and the soldiers responsible for the attack on Kasugho should be tried. He said some had already been arrested and await trial.

The people of Kasugho now say they want to be sure there will be no repetition of the October raid.

Desanges Kavira Kihuha is an IWPR trainee in Goma. This story is part of a series produced by journalists who attended IWPR Netherlands recent international journalism course in Goma.

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