



Unheard Voices and Under Siege: Young Girls and Women Victim of Rape in Tigray

By Mulugeta Abai, Executive Director, Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture

“In the Yugoslav and Rwanda statutes, rape is included as a crime against humanity. Those provisions derive from rape having been a crime against humanity from the late 1940s in legal documents drafted right after Nuremburg and the Tokyo trials. Rape was also interpreted into the customs of war provision of the Yugoslav statute given its long-recognized status as a war crime, based, for example, on the holding of rapes as war crimes in the 1947 Tokyo Judgment.” .

"rape was the rule and its absence was the exception." "rape was systematic and was used as a "weapon" by the perpetrators of the massacres. (United Nations Special Rapporteur on Rwanda, Rene Degni-Segui). That is exactly what is happening to girls, women, young and old in Tigray region now at this very moment and their voices need to be heard and perpetrators brought to justice.

Most of the world's refugees - a staggering 80% - are women and Special Rapporteur their dependent children. Yet despite their presence in such vast proportions in the global refugee population, women remain the forgotten majority, a wail of unheard voices, unnoticed victims, a rollcall of numbers.

The outrageous silence intensifies when the cries from female refugees subjected to an almost unique abuse: rape. In times of violence and armed conflicts, rape often becomes an instrument of war on a par with scorch and burn. Throughout history, enemy soldiers have swarmed through the homelands of the vanquished, subduing the population and raping every female they encountered, including tiny girls and white-haired grannies.

Usually, when this happens, the vanquished men, the leaders of the overrun country, howl in collective misery and label the endemic sexual violence a conspiracy to destroy their national pride and honor.

Main 194 Jarvis St, 2nd Fl., Toronto, ON, Canada M5B 2B7 T: 416.363.1066 F: 416.363.2122 E: mabai@ccvt.org Toll Free: 1.877.292.2288

Scarborough 2401 Eglinton Ave. E., 3rd Fl., Unit 310, Scarborough, ON, Canada M1K 2N8 T: 416.750.3045 F: 416.750.4990

The Hub 1527 Victoria Park Avenue 2nd Fl., Toronto, ON, Canada M1L 2T3 T: 416.750.9600 F: 416.750.9200

Mississauga Office 130 Dundas St. East, #204, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada L5A 3V8 T:905-277-2288 F:905-277-8083

20 Palace Road Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5A 1G4 T:416-364-3184

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When German troops marched through Belgium during World War I, they raped so systematically, and the Franco-Belgian propaganda machine spewed so expertly, that The Rape of the Hun became a dominant metaphor. Afterward, in peace time, propaganda analysts dismissed these mass rapes as rhetoric designed to whip up British and American support. In the face of new political realities, the Rape of the Hun or the Rape of Belgium had lost its propaganda value. It had become merely the individual tragedies of thousands of women, and no longer mattered - except, of course, to its silenced victims.

In wartime, women are raped by ordinary youths as casually or as savagely as a village is pillaged or destroyed. Sexual trespass on the enemy's women is to a soldier one of the satisfactions of conquest, for once he is handed a rifle and told to kill, he becomes an adrenaline-charged young man with permission to kick in the door, to grab, to steal, to boot the vanquished in the face, to give vent to his suppressed rage against all women who belong to other men. Each time a woman is raped, it saps the collective spirit of all women and of the whole nation. This is the case in the former Yugoslavia and in Somalia, where mass rape leaves bitter reminders long after the troops have departed. And if a woman who is a victim of wartime rape survives the assault, how do her people treat her later, when that war is over?

During World War II, when German soldiers were again on the march, they committed atrocious rapes on Russian and Jewish women in the occupied villages and cities, and dragged other women off to forced service in brothels, or to death. In the Pacific, in 1937, the Japanese occupation of Nanking, China's war time capital, was accomplished with such freewheeling sexual violence that it became known as Nanking Massacre or The Rape Nanking. During this dreadful operation around 200,000 Chinese civilians were raped and murdered by the Japanese troops.

During World War II, 200,000 “comfort women” or “lanfu” from Korea, China, Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, the Dutch East Indies, Indonesia, and Japan were enslaved. They were forced into sexual servitude to Japanese Imperial Armed forces before and during the war. Girls, as young as 12,

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were taken from homes through coercion, intimidation and deception. Most came from poor, rural backgrounds. As a result of multiple rapes many of the women were later unable to bear children and were never able to marry. And astounding though it seems, it was not until recently that the "comfort women" overcame their shame sufficiently to talk about how they were coerced into playing the role of sexual conscripts for the Japanese Army.

No matter how often such mass rapes occur, they are always described as "unprecedented". In 1971, when Pakistanis methodically violated the women of newly independent Bangladesh, the indignant government of Bangladesh denounced the rapes as "unprecedented" in their appeals for international aid to help with the aftermath. They even went so far as to praise the raped women as Heroines of Independence, and permitted them to secure abortions. When the victims returned to their own villages, however, they were ostracized by their own men.

In the course of crisis in the former Yugoslavia, thousands of unwanted babies born conceived through rape by soldiers. A preliminary report by a team of investigators from the European Community estimated about 20,000 victims. Amnesty International has found that abuses against women, including rape, have been widespread. In some cases, the rapes are so organized that women are deliberately detained so that they can be raped or otherwise sexually abused. In the current unprecedented destruction and scorched earth bombardment of the people of Tigray using fighter jets, drones, tanks and over 500,000 ground troops, the whole infrastructure, factories, religious site (both Christian and Moslem), school, hospitals, health centres, universities, water supply lines are being looted, destroyed and shipped to Amhara region in Eritrea. This is not all. Rape and sexual violence have become the tool of subjugation and unheard suffering.

The U.N. special representative on sexual violence in conflict says "serious allegations of sexual violence" have emerged in Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region, while women and girls face shortages of rape kits and HIV drugs amid restrictions on humanitarian access.

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“There are also disturbing reports of individuals allegedly forced to rape members of their own family, under threats of imminent violence,” Pramila Patten said in a statement released on Thursday, January 21, 2021. She added: “Some women have also reportedly been forced by military elements to have sex in exchange for basic commodities, while medical centers have indicated an increase in the demand for emergency contraception and testing for sexually transmitted infections.”

A significant number of women have been subjected to torture, starvation, terrorism, humiliation and mutilation simply because they were women. If they were not women but men, if they were members of any other caste or group, their treatment would be recognized as a civil and political emergency and as a gross defilement of humanity. Yet despite the clear record of abuse, women's rights are not recognized or classified as human rights. Therefore, it is impossible to pinpoint the grave consequences of these grave abuses on the fundamental issues of women's lives.

In many cases, the sexual violation intensifies the suffering of Tigray female victims who, alongside their men, are subjected to deliberate and arbitrary killing, detention, torture and ill-treatment. However, rape is a sinister and unique humiliating assault. It has traumatic social repercussions, which may be affected by the individual's cultural origins or social status. These women feel degraded and ashamed, and often fear that if they reveal what has been to them, they will confront a social stigma as well. So, they choose eternal silence as the more bearable option.

The International Community has the obligation and the responsibility to liberate the women, the mothers who are being humiliated by the evil minds who are rejoicing because they have achieved what they desired - to destroy the trust among nations and nationalities. Innocent lives are lost, dehumanized, and evil minds and evil forces, darker than those of fascism are getting the upper hand as is the case in Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, Sudan, Angola just to name a few.

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A VOA article, published few days ago, provided additional testimonials that reinforce the rape, sexual violence and humiliation the women of Tigray of all ages are facing. The article mentioned the case of a 25-year old coffee seller who was raped by a soldier wearing an Ethiopian federal army uniform. It also cited a recent meeting in Mekelle that was broadcasted, during which a soldier asked why women were being raped in Mekelle too, where federal police and local police were operating. Doctors who reported having treated numerous victims of rape were also cited. In December of last year, a Guardian article cited a woman who fled Tigray with her son after hearing of federal militias raping Tigrayan women on the basis of their ethnicity.

The Associate Press and Reuters reported Ethiopian Minister Filsan Abdullahi, has admitted and issued a statement after a task force visited Tigray to investigate accounts of sexual assault in a region under communication blockage, bombardment, extrajudicial execution, destruction of historical sites for the last 100 days. The Minister said “We have received report back from taskforce team on the ground in Tigray region, they have unfortunately established rape has taken place conclusively and without a doubt” we await the investigation of these horrible crimes”, adding that a team from the attorney general’s office is processing the information.

The minister’s statement came out hours after the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission in a new report said “108 rapes had been reported to health facilities in the past two months in the Tigray capital, Mekele, Adigrat Wukro and Ayder”. These numbers probably err on the low side because women fear the retaliation and social ignominy that reporting a rape could bring.

Spokesman for the Women’s Ministry Adinew Abera said “we will deploy experts to all districts of Tigray, so the numbers will be higher than what is mentioned”.

“The local structures such as police and health facilities where victims of sexual violence would normally turn to report such crimes are no longer in place” This is the tip of the ice berg as the total number of girls, women and nuns living in monasteries who are victims of rape and sexual assault are mourning in silence.

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Such reports are disconcerting because they suggest that sexual violence in addition to government-imposed hunger is being used as a weapon of war by the Ethiopian and Eritrean armies. The Abiy government paid \$1,000,000,000 US to the Eritrean government led by another psychopath Isayas Afeworki to destroy and exterminate the people of Tigray. This is not fundamentally different from the Rwandan genocide, two civil wars in Liberia, a decade-long civil war in Papua New Guinea, the Bosnian war - to name a few examples – were all marked by the extensive raping of women and girls (and in numerous cases of boys and men), reflecting the almost inevitable weaponization of rape in war-time.

In the resolution 1820 passed 19 June, 2008, the Security Council noted that “women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instil fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group.” The resolution demanded the “immediate and complete cessation by all parties to armed conflict of all acts of sexual violence against civilians.” This United Nations Security Council Resolution was unanimously adopted and the use of sexual violence as a tool of war, and declares that rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide”

While women’s rights groups and others working to end sexual violence are under no illusions that the resolution is a panacea, most agree that it is a much-needed step in the right direction. They believe that by noting that “rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide,” the resolution will strike a blow at the culture of impunity that surrounds sexual violence in conflict zones and allows rapists to walk without fear of punishment.

Indeed, the resolution stresses the need for “the exclusion of sexual violence crimes from amnesty provisions in the context of conflict resolution processes,” calls upon member states to comply with their obligations to prosecute those responsible for such crimes, and emphasizes “the importance of ending impunity for such acts.”

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Ultimately, however, the effectiveness of UN Resolution 1820 (2008) in reducing sexual violence and bringing its perpetrators to book will have to be gauged in places such as Ethiopia arguably the epicentre of sexual violence against women today.

The Croatian author Slavenka Drakulic, who has written extensively about war crimes in the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, and whose latest book is on the war crimes trials in The Hague, says the Security Council resolution is historic. “Finally, sexual violence is recognized as a weapon, and can be punished,” she says, adding: “We know now, as we knew even before the passage of this resolution, that rape is a kind of slow murder.”

Rape is always torture, says Manfred Nowak, Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Rape and sexual abuse as forms of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment are clearly in contravention of international human rights standards, as well as of international humanitarian law. It has been stated time and time again but whenever the issue of defending women and their dependents arises, laws and international human rights standards, the international human rights instruments are tossed onto the back burner. Once again women and their dependents are denied the protection they need and deserve. Once again, they have become unheard voices, unnoticed victims, a rollcall of numbers.

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