

CONFLICT

Wallstrom making progress in fight against rape in conflict

But when will the EU help her?

The Libya conflict has also included an element of war that former Commissioner, Margot Wallstrom is dedicated to fighting against; the rape of women as part of conflict. She described the evidence from two Libyan soldiers who had been ordered into a house, where the occupants had been shot in the legs to disable them, and the young women were taken upstairs where an estimated 20 soldiers raped them.

Now acting as the United Nations Special Representative for Sexual Violence in Conflict, Wallstrom said that she was disappointed that the use of sexual violence was not part of the UN resolution on Libya, but after hearing many such reports of "very violent behavior" the UN Security Council accepts that the omission of such acts in the resolution was a mistake and they intend to double the humanitarian presence on the ground. Reports are still being collected. "This is surrounded by so much shame and stigma that it is difficult to find reliable information."

"We still have to fight the notion that these crimes are acceptable or inevitable," she said during a visit to Brussels, adding that, "some think that this is part of war or collateral damage because it has been part of every conflict, it is even mentioned in the Bible, but we can put an end to this."

"The international legislation is there, but it's the whole attitude." Asked about the arrest of the head of the IMF and that there seemed to be an institutionalized sexism in high offices she said, "Of course, you only have to look at the comments being made. You're supposed to believe him as a powerful man, but she needs to be given the dignity of being listened to as well. It's a classical example of what we are dealing with," although she stressed she only deals with violence in conflict, "but it reflects on the role of women in society and the lack of respect towards them."

Heart of Darkness

The level of violence is horrific. In the Democratic Republic of Congo the use of rape as a weapon in the protracted conflict has reached levels that are beyond the use of superlatives. Wallstrom revealed that the militias roaming Eastern Congo had started branding their rape victims, each with their own marks, occasionally by killing them by shooting the women in their genitalia. "You cannot imagine the brutality; I think they just want to destroy life."

One of the root causes of the continued violence in the DRC is the contest over mines and the access to rare minerals, such as coltan, a vital part of mobile phones. Wallstrom says that the mining villages have women there who are kept as sex slaves



Margot Wallstrom talking to New Europe during her visit to Brussels. | UNICEF

and she is pushing for action on the minerals, similar to that taken over 'blood diamonds'. "I hope the EU will take the initiative and follow the US lead and adopt legislation to force manufacturers to trace the origin of the minerals they use." She said that it was vital to have a global regime in place to monitor and police the use of these minerals, and who is producing them.

Waiting for Europe

She repeated a point she has made for a year now, that she needs a single person in the EU institutions who she can liaise with on this issue, but so far there has been no action. She said that she was focusing her efforts on seven countries: DRC, Liberia, Central African Republic, Sudan, Columbia and Bosnia. "The EU is working in these areas also, so we should be working together."

She points out that the African Union has appointed a representative for sexual violence in conflict, to act as a partner and the nascent government of South Sudan has also asked her team to advise in drawing up the constitution for the new nation.

"I am convinced that this is something Cathy Ashton wants to work towards and now it is time to introduce a focal point for me to work with," she says, "but I've seen more action, in New York, from the US and individual member states. They come to us wanting to know how they can help." She says that she can see such a person being appointed, "I know it's not easy with

the External Action Service being set up," she adds.

However, she says that now is a very good time to have someone in such a position, "now we have a political window of opportunity," before the new service's structure becomes too fixed. But a question remains over the EEAS. Why is it that the African Union can support the UN Special Representative, but not the EEAS, with its half a billion euro budget? New Europe asked the EEAS about providing a person to report on sexual violence in conflict, and act as a liaison with the UN, but received no reply.

Progress against Impunity

Wallstrom is also pleased with the UN, saying that they have provided her with all the tools she needs, not just to take the issue seriously, but to chase and try those involved in ordering or participating in the mass rapes of civilians.

"There has been almost total impunity for this crime, although there have been some tribunals," she says, reminding us that it was only after the Balkan conflict that sexual violence was recognized as a war crime, although convictions remain rare. "In Bosnia there were 12 prosecutions in the national courts, but around 50,000 women were raped during the war. There has been no proper justice for those women," she says.

"I want to go after the perpetrators, I want to put them in jail," she says, as ending what she calls "the culture of impunity" is her main task. "This is the only

way of showing there are consequences to their acts."

But the ever energetic Special Representative has, since beginning her job less than 18 months ago with no office or budget, has brought the issue to the top of the agenda. There are now training programmes in place for peacekeepers and a strengthening of discipline in the UN forces, together with a legal framework for prosecutions of sexual violence as a war crime.

Another aspect, is pushing for help and support for the victims of rape and also those who perpetrate it. The two Libyan soldiers who took part in a gang rape, mentioned at the beginning, were forced to participate and are also traumatized for the experience, enhanced by it being their first sexual experience. Wallstrom insists that dealing with victims and the rapists is part of conflict resolution and more resources need to be devoted. "In Sierra Leone and Liberia, these were often child soldiers, who were forced to rape their mothers or sisters, sometimes having to kill them afterwards. This was part of cutting them off from their communities so they belonged to the warlords."

"There are such deep consequences to this crime that we have completely overlooked and have not understood what it does to a society and why it is so difficult, afterwards, to create sustainable peace. This has to stop. This has to end. It destroys society."