

HUMAN RIGHTS

# Are UN member preparing to abandon DRC rape victims?

By Andy Carling

When it comes to human rights violations, many would feel that the use of mass rape of civilians would be one of the gravest breaches. Former Commissioner, Margot Wallstrom is the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict should have one of the least controversial jobs in the world. Who could argue against such a mission?

Quite a few, it turns out.

Representative Wallstrom spoke to New Europe as she landed in Brussels, on her way to report to the UN. She was clearly moved after meeting survivors of the recent mass rape, when 400 women were raped by militias over a period of four days, just 20km from the UN mission base, that was meant to protect civilians.

The incident outraged the world, and the UN has investigated it and admitted that they let people down. However, the picture is not as clear as it looks. The UN force has few soldiers to protect an area the size of France, with poor communications, few and fragile roads and dense jungle.

The Mission has had a recent success, with the arrest of Colonel Mayele, from the Mai-Mai Cheka, in an operation Wallstrom described as "very professional" and said that it would help stop "the culture of impunity", adding that, "this is how you end it. By showing we are serious about punishing the perpetrators. This also sends a strong message to the leaders of the DRC, to take this issue seriously."



Former Commissioner, Margot Wallstrom is the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict | EPA/CHRISTOPHE KARABA

She was concerned that Mayele could be released from captivity by bribery and pressed the Congo government to pass the case to the International Criminal Court.

The presence of Congolese troops from the National Army was another concern, Wallstrom said that "they have no food, no barracks and no salaries. This means that they will live off the population". She said that some of them "were actually starving".

Wallstrom argued for strengthening the mission, saying they "need to have the resources to protect the civilians". She said that she hoped there would be more resources given to the mission so that they could fulfil their mandate, saying, "You have to give the resources. You can not pretend that MONUSCO, (The UN operation) can do this with so few soldiers."

Asked if there was any sign of more

resources being provided, she replied, "On the contrary I think there are signs that they will be reduced." She said that she was trying to describe her feelings about this, but her anger was clear. "We can not raise expectations and at the same time, diminish resources."

Asked if the recent case of mass rape wasn't enough to concentrate people's minds on allocating resources, what would it take, she said, "This is a very important question. The attitude, especially among the DRC leaders is that this is to be seen as inevitable, as a consequence and cost of war. I told that these incidents are brutalising society, they are destroying all family and decent values."

She said that the refugee camps were safe but there were "daily" rapes of women who leave the camps, looking for water, firewood, going to market and so on. The Commander of the Congo soldiers, according to Wallstrom, told her that he refused to send out his men to protect the women in the fields, "because they might be attacked".

The situation in the UN was little better, as some states "just see this as a women's issue" and some African states are claiming that the UN is somehow picking on Africa.

With nobody to protect the civilians of Eastern Congo, apart from the UN Mission, will the UN step up and fulfil its mandate to protect them, or leave them exposed to the killers and rapists of the militias? The answer to that will tell the world if the UN's commitment to human rights is a promise, or just empty words.



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## Postcard from Abu Dhabi: Seasons of Change

By Dr. Greg Austin

POLITICS

## Zimbabwe: little hope for reconciliation

As Zimbabwe prepares for more elections in 2011, few expect anything other than a repeat of the previous ballot that saw murder and widespread violence, including the Opposition Leader, Morgan Tsvangirai being publicly beaten.

Since then, not one person has been held accountable for the deaths or violence and Robert Mugabe has declared that no such trials will take place.

Despite losing the election, ZANU-PF have clung onto power with a coalition between Tsvangirai and Mugabe. As part of the deal between the two, known as the Global Political Agreement (GPA), the country set up a Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration under Opposition Minister, Sekai Holland. Speaking with New Europe, Ms Holland said that they had completed their National Plan and, "Our role was advisory so we put in place a process of consultations with people, churches, civil society and the diaspora about what would be a good infrastructure for peace." She said it became clear that they would need a stakeholders' conference and a document to be drawn up from the conference would be "a covenant" against violence, which would be debated by parliament.

In reality, the consultations have not been harmonious and the Minister has stormed out of meetings, when angry villagers tackled her about the lack of progress. She even threatened to quit at one meeting where her organization was heavily criticised.

"We are trying to discover the root cause of the violent epochs in our society," she said. She said there were many causes but the GPA was an agreement that gave the country a fresh start. However when it was pointed out that cycles of violence occurred around elections, she said, "Knowing that, I think we also knew when we went into the GPA it was for Zimbabweans to organise free and fair elections."

Asked if the next elections would be so, she said, "I'm surprised that people don't give us credit for the progress that has been made. That man has been stopped because of violence, which happens during a transition. We are putting in the mechanisms for free elections"

When asked about the fact that the last few elections were won by the opposition, who failed to take charge, she said, "We are putting in place mechanisms for transferring power," and the GPA was still holding.