

Joint UN-Red Cross appeal to end rising sexual violence as a weapon of war

Sexual violence in conflict – and the stigma that survivors often face – must be addressed urgently, [UN chief António Guterres](#) said on Monday, in a joint appeal for more funding and international action, together with the head of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer.

Describing how he was “frequently horrified” by the first-hand accounts of survivors in his previous role as head of the UN refugee agency, [UNHCR](#), Mr. Guterres said that only last year, Rohingya refugees who had fled into Bangladesh spoke of the mass gang-rape of women and girls in their homes, before they fled northern Myanmar.

“The world is growing ever more aware of the ubiquity of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence,” he said. “We must do everything in our power to end the horror and stigma that affects hundreds of thousands of women and girls, as well as men and boys, worldwide.”

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His comments were echoed by women’s rights defender Julienne Lusenge, who heads a coalition of organizations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that help victims of sexual violence seek justice through the judicial system.

“During this month of February, our medical centre, Karibuni Wa Mama in Bunia, has received in a week 28 children, including a two year-old” who were all “victims of serious sexual violence,” said Ms. Lusenge, who is the Director of the Fund for Congolese Women and President of Solidarité Feminine pour la Paix et le Développement Integral (SOFEPADI).

“We keep receiving women...sexual slaves of various armed groups in our different offices. They are suffering from sexual slavery but also forced marriage, forced labour, mental, physical and economic violence as well as inhuman and degrading treatment.”

Appeal for \$27 million, and for countries to ‘re-state their commitment’

Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross ([ICRC](#)), warned that the world was facing a grave protection failure amid

rising sexual violence in conflict.

“We are asking States to re-state their commitment to international humanitarian law,” he said. “The law is clear: rape and other forms of sexual violence are violations. The Geneva Conventions made this prohibition clear and universal and yet 70 years on, we continue to face failures of behaviour and accountability.”

In an appeal for \$27 million to fund a better response to the issue in 14 countries, Mr. Maurer described the lasting damage caused by sexual and gender-based violence, which is used as a tactic of war to dehumanize victims and destabilize communities.

“We work with the survivors of horrific acts, including with women and girls given as rewards in war, fathers whose sons have been abducted and raped, young women fleeing disaster and conflict only to be sexually enslaved, and with detainees when sexual atrocities are wielded as means of torture,” he said.

Following the joint appeal in Geneva, the United Nations and Red Cross pledged to listen to survivors and victims of these crimes, to enable their voices to be heard and to support them through local organizations – particularly women’s organizations – in conflict zones.

In addition, the UN will promote women’s participation in conflict prevention and resolution and in all formal peace processes; instruct its peacekeeping operations to ensure they have systems in place to prevent conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence; and pursue justice for victims and survivors.

An additional way to tackle the prevalence of such violence against women, girls – and to a lesser extent, boys and men – is to promote gender equality, Mr. Guterres told journalists in Geneva.

“If we want to address the problems of violence, sexual violence against women and girls and also, indirectly, with a positive impact on sexual violence against men and boys,” said the UN chief, “it’s absolutely essential to look into the questions of power in our societies”.

“And, maybe you call it feminism, I can tell that the most important reform I am making at the United Nations is to make sure we have gender parity at all levels of the organization.”