

Royal visit to DRC shows urgent need to tackle sexual violence in conflict

- Her Royal Highness The Countess of Wessex, accompanied by FCD0 Minister of State, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, the UK Prime Minister's Special Representative for Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict (PSVI), visits a ground-breaking foundation for survivors run by Nobel Prize Laureate Dr. Denis Mukwege.
- This is the first visit by a member of the Royal family to DRC.
- The visit comes ahead of a major global conference on PSVI being hosted in London in November by the UK Government, which Her Royal Highness will attend.

The Countess of Wessex is visiting the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), accompanied by Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office Minister of State Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, to raise awareness of the urgent need to tackle sexual violence in conflict in the DRC and around the world.

For Her Royal Highness, the visit is part of a long-standing commitment to championing this issue.

Lord Ahmad as the UK Prime Minister's Special Representative for PSVI, joined her on the visit to gain a deeper and practical insight into DRC's experiences of tackling conflict-related sexual violence, and identify lessons learned to share at a global PSVI Conference in the UK next month.

Nobel Peace Prize Winner Dr Denis Mukwege welcomed them to his groundbreaking foundation in Bukavu. The Panzi Foundation has transformed the lives of thousands of women who have suffered sexual violence in the armed conflict and violence in DRC. The Foundation provides medical care, legal assistance, psychological support and economic programmes to offer a holistic model of care for survivors of these horrific crimes.

The Countess of Wessex and Lord Ahmad saw first-hand the difference the Panzi Foundation has made to women's lives during the first ever visit by a member of the Royal family to DRC.

The UK will host a major international conference in London in November, marking 10 years since the launch of PSVI, an initiative which Lord Ahmad now leads. The conference will bring together the UK and its partners around the world to review progress made in the last decade, identify shared challenges and agree further action.

Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon said:

Sexual violence in conflict continues to shatter lives and scar communities around the world. Tackling it is a top priority for the UK and we will continue to work with our partners to provide better support for survivors, bring perpetrators to justice and encourage

partners to share new ideas and experiences of tackling sexual violence in conflict at the conference in November.

Since 2012, we have committed over £50 million to support projects around the world that help prevent conflict-related sexual violence, including in the DRC. This includes providing £2.7 million to the Global Survivors Fund, whose projects in the DRC have supported over 1000 survivors.

Dr Mukwege, Founder of the Panzi Hospital and Foundation, and President of the Global Survivors Fund, said:

My staff and I are grateful for the visit of Her Royal Highness The Countess of Wessex and Lord Tariq Ahmad. Too often, the world turns a blind eye towards the suffering of survivors, especially here in DRC. Their visit will highlight the ongoing critical work to end conflict-related sexual violence, both in this country and around the globe.

During the visit to eastern DRC, The Countess of Wessex and Lord Ahmad met with survivors of sexual violence, and civil society organisations in Bukavu to gain an understanding of the challenges they face.

In Kinshasa, Her Royal Highness and Lord Ahmad will also meet President Felix Tshisekedi and First Lady Denise Tshisekedi, the Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Christophe Lutundula, and other Ministers, for discussions on sexual violence in conflict, the UK's international conference, and other important issues such as climate change.

Notes to editors

- Photography of the visit will be available from the Press Association.
- Since its launch in 2019, the UK has provided £2.7m to the Global Survivors Fund (GSF). Its projects in DRC have supported over 1000 survivors to access health and psychological care, education, or support for economic enterprises.
- Last year the UK provided \$140,000 to help the Panzi Foundation to increase access to legal advice and mediation for survivors.
- In recent years, UK support to TRIAL International in DRC has provided free legal advice to survivors, strengthened capacity in the country to investigate, document and litigate effectively against crimes, and helped to tackle the culture of impunity.
- Between 2021-2022, the UK provided over £500,000 to the UN Team of Experts on conflict related sexual violence (CRSV) to increase the capacity of the DRC investigative and judicial authorities to investigate and prosecute CRSV crimes; and ensure judicial decisions on reparations are enforced. For instance, this funding supported training for police, special protection units, civil and military prosecutors and judges on the investigation and prosecution of CRSV cases, and on ensuring protection measures for victims and witnesses are in place. UK

funding to World Vision supported community discussions in DRC led by religious leaders on the principles of the Declaration of Humanity, which challenge the stigma that survivors of sexual violence face.