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Women versus oil

by Nicole Sotelo



"I asked God to kill me," said the 29-year old rape survivor. Her brother, children and parents had been murdered in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's decade-long war. What hope was left? But she saw a baby, alive, on the ground near her slain parents. She carried the child to safety and now is raising the child as her own. "Maybe God didn't want me to lose my life."

This story and hundreds more like them have been heard and shared by Eve Ensler, director of V-Day, an international organization working to stop violence against women. Ensler, known internationally for her play "The Vagina Monologues," has worked tirelessly to make the world aware of what has been called "Africa's World War." Over the last decade there has been fighting among various factions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC. The war has taken the lives of more than 5 million people due to the conflict or war-related starvation and disease -- the most war-related deaths since World War II. One of the most common and most brutal weapons of choice has been the rape of women and children.

It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of rapes have occurred. Accurate statistics are impossible but two years ago the United Nations reported 27,000 rapes in one region alone. And those are just the ones that were reported.

No woman is spared. Young girls and elderly women alike have been beaten, gang-raped, and disemboweled. Women's children are killed in front of them. Pregnant women are cut open. Those who survive have difficulty finding adequate medical care, let alone counseling for the emotional scars. And

those who care for rape survivors are also vulnerable. In September, a hospital known for its care of rape survivors was attacked.

What is being done to stop this violence? There is a U.N. peacekeeping force of about 17,000 troops from 18 countries around the globe. It is the largest peacekeeping force currently in the world.

Not one soldier has been sent from the United States. We, instead, have chosen to protect another natural resource. Not women. Not children. But oil.

Instead of going to war to protect the hundreds of thousands of women being brutally raped and murdered in the DRC, the United States has chosen to go to war to protect our stake in Iraq's oil reserves. There are currently 146,000 troops stationed in Iraq. Helping the troops, there have been up to 180,000 private contractors in Iraq under U.S. contracts. But not one soldier or private contractor has been sent to stop the violence in the DRC.

The National Priorities Project estimates that the United States has spent more than \$570 billion in Iraq since the outbreak of the war. The project released a report this month that shows the U.S. military spends up to 30 percent of its annual budget to secure energy resources internationally. This adds up to \$215.4 billion dollars a year.

Contrast this with small organizations like V-Day which is asking individuals to donate \$25 or \$50 to help a small hospital in the DRC that reconstructs women's vaginas after they have been brutally ripped open not only by penises but by guns and pieces of wood that men force into their bodies.

One woman, Claudine Mwabachizi, recently spoke about her kidnapping by men in a forest. She had been tied to a tree for days and repeatedly gang-raped. The New York Times ran a story this week that quoted her as saying, "A lot of us keep these secrets to ourselves." Instead, she decided to share her story publicly. Her reason? "To free my sisters," she said.

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My fellow Catholics, we are also called to speak boldly and urgently to stop the violence being done against women and all people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We can no longer allow our country to spend billions on a war to "free up" oil. We must help free our sisters, instead.

For more information, to donate or to take action, go to www.vday.org or www.raisehopeforcongo.org.

*(Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates www.WomenHealing.com. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, she currently works at Call To Action.)*

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