

Stop Congo sex violence

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Here, in America, when we hear the word 'rape' we think of women being snatched off the streets by a stranger or being forced by a man they know. But in eastern Congo, located in Central Africa, rape is used as a tool of war. Women, girls and, increasingly, men are subject to this brutal act that damages both the victim's body and spirit.

In an unprecedented move, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton visited the area and pledged \$17 million dollars in support of Congo rape victims. At least \$10 million of the money the U.S. has pledged will be used to train doctors who will treat rape victims. Much of what is left will be used to help prevent the sex attacks. The U.S. must not only follow through on its pledge, but it must lead the way and encourage other international powerhouses to join forces to end sex violence in the Congo.

The United Nations considers eastern Congo the rape capital of the world, having recorded close to 200,000 cases of sexual violence against girls and women in the region since 1996. The number of cases where men have been raped has risen; workers in the region theorize that the male rapes are a tool militia groups use to humiliate and break the spirits of the Congolese people.

The war in the Congo has been going on for years and is one of the longest ongoing wars in recent decades. The conflict is rooted in land disputes, a desire to control mineral resources, political corruption and tribal and ethnic pride. Rebel militia groups, the government and mining companies all wish to control and exploit the area's rich mineral resources. Rebels fund their operations by smuggling diamonds, copper and other minerals so that they can purchase guns and fuel.

Governments are forced to create military regimes in mineral rich areas so that they are protected; these military forces are often corrupt, with little respect for civilians.

The U.S. has paid little attention to the Congo over the last several years. In 1995, under the watch of former President Bill Clinton, we did little in the region when nearly a million Africans were slaughtered over the course of 90 days during a violent uprising.

Clinton's recent visit to the Congo is a good sign; she is the first secretary of state to visit in a decade. In her role, she must also lobby the international community, asking that they too get involved. So many European countries have benefited from the Africa's rich resources; they must begin to give back what they have taken. Millions have suffered as a result of the ongoing war in the Congo and it will take much more than the U.S. has pledge to end the violence, stabilize the government and rebuild lives.