Gory Tales from the World’s Rape Capital

Contributed by Pita Ochai
Wednesday, 27 October 2010

The United Nations and other humanitarian organisations release frightening statistics of rape committed against Congo DR women

After many years of exposure to the worst recorded sexual abuse, women in Congo DR on Sunday, October 17, took to the streets in Kinshasa, Congo DR capital, to press home their demand for an end to the heinous act. The abuse was committed by the armed rebel groups, the Congolese national army and the United Nations, UN, forces in the eastern part of the country. According to the UN report, more than 15,000 women were raped in eastern Congo DR last year. Between July 30 and August 2, this year, more than 300 women were also raped by the forces. This figure was obtained from women who were willing to admit that they were raped and got medical help. From the astonishing figure, the UN has termed Congo DR as “the world capital of rape.” It was an effort to put an end to that ugly experience that the World March of Women in collaboration with other women groups, marched through the streets in the country’s capital. The protesters clad in bright traditional garbs carried placards that reads: “My heart is in pain, why are you raping me? Nita Vielle, a Congolese women’s activist, said the protesters who took to the streets to speak against the sexual violence in the country, were made up of survivors of the rape. The survivors left their hospital beds to join the protest and later returned to continue the treatment after the march. “They have had enough, enough, enough, enough of the war,” she said. For Celia Alldridge, a representative from World March of Women, the protest was to liberate the Congolese women who have been made prisoners in their own home. “It’s just great to have so many women out on the streets. We believe that women should not be made prisoners in their own homes. I tell you, it’s a wonderful thing to see all the women together, just for one reason which is for the peace of the women of Congo. This is the freedom of the Congo women,” she said. The UN Population Fund, UNFPA, presented a higher figure of the raped victims. According to its report, 17,507 sexual violence cases were reported in Congo DR in 2009. About 9,000 of these cases are from the North and South Kivu, which have been at the centre of conflict in the eastern part of the country. The report stated that the rape cases have been on the increase daily in the eastern province of South Kivu where attacks by the Forces democratiques pour la liberation du Rwandan, FDLR, a Rwandan Hutu militia, against civilians have intensified. The FDLR forces attacks at night, burn houses and snatch women to the forest to rape them. There has also been accusation that the FARDC, Congolese national army were involved in the heinous rape act. According to Nestor Yombo, public information officer, UN office for the Co-ordination of Human Affairs, at least 463 cases of rape can be traced to the FARDC, which is more than half the number reported in the whole of 2008. The rise in rape cases coincided with the deployment of Congolese troops in the province in preparation for another anti-FDLR operation. The FDLR rape daily but there is also isolated rape cases by the FARDC, the Congolese national army, which the government has not taken charge of for a long time,” she said. Despite unprecedented international condemnation of the sexual violence, its impunity remains widespread. Civil society reports show that the national army and the police were both guilty of sexual violence. Yet, the army and the police in the region face no risk of prosecution as the government has denied allegations against its forces. A FDLR breakaway group, mixed with Congolese militia called Rasta, was identified as primarily responsible for a pattern of rape and genital mutilation against Congolese women that some analysts believe amounted to ethnic cleansing in pursuit of territorial domination. After the mass rapes in July and August came to light, UN peacekeepers based just 20 miles away were criticised for not responding to the cry of the Congolese for help. Human Right Watchers have at different times called for an improved performance of the UN peacekeepers who failed to respond to the mass rape. Time to Praise God Pita Ochai The world applauded their rescue after 69 days in the dept of the earth as one of the best work of technology. The 33 rescued Chilean miners who have been united with their families, appreciate the fact that, apart from the role of technology in the rescue, there was also a divine intervention. On October 17, the miners returned to the site of the San Jose mine where they went underground for a thanksgiving service with their families and friends. With 33 flags representing each of the men on a hillside above the entrance to the San Jose mine, the rescued miners and their families danced and sang in praise to God for their survival. Before the thanksgiving at the San Jose mine, a dozen of the miners first paid a visit to Camp Esperana, a religious site meaning “Hope” where relatives had prayed for their survival since the collapse of the gold and copper mine on August 5. Luis Urzua, the foreman of the shift and the last miner to be pulled to safety, said they have every reason to give thanks to God for a successful rescue. The men, who were still wearing sunglasses to protect their eyes after a long period in darkness underground seemed not to have overcome the experiences from the deep earth. Relatives reported that some of the miners were having trouble sleeping at night as some still dream walk at the middle of the night believing they were still trapped at the 700m deep in the ground. One member of the Mario Sepulveda’s family said: “He woke at 4 a.m. and went to the corner of the room saying it was his turn to wait for a dove.” He was referring to the communication tubes that went back and forth from the surface when they were trapped. Mario, now nicknamed Super Mario after the Nintendo computer game character, described how he is haunted by the experience. “We were in total darkness. The heat was oppressive. We all felt the Devil was down there with us. We prayed and prayed. It was a dark, black hole. We were buried alive. We were all so scared. We begged God to help us. We were worried we would starve to death or that the water would run out and we would die horribly from dehydration,” he said. Edison Pena, the 34-year-old miner dubbed “the runner” by his colleagues because of his daily five mile runs through the dark corridors of the mine said that it was the exercise that kept him alive in the tunnel. While the 33 rescued were celebrating their rescue, workers from the San Jose mine used the gathering to stage a protest complaining that they had not received wages or a

severance package since the mine was closed on August 5. Javier Costillo, one of the miners’ union leaders, said: “We are the forgotten victims of the mine collapse. We still have not had what is owed to us from the San Jose company or any help from the government.” Rocking the Boat Dike Onwuamaeze The move by President Nicolas Sarkozy to reform France’s pension system is turning the country upside down. Already economic and social lives are being brought to a standstill as demonstration against the pension reform was intensified and became more and more violent. Among the cities embroiled in the strike are Paris, Lyon and Marseille. As at press time, a third of petrol filling stations in France were without fuel supply while air travel, trains, shipping, postal services and schools suffered disruptions as more than one million people in several cities of France took to the streets to say no to the government’s pension reform. The reform, whose bill is in the process of being passed into law by the parliament, will increase the retirement age from 60 to 62. It will also require pensioners to receive a full pension at 67 instead of 65. According to the French civil aviation authority, more than fifty percent of the flight out of Paris Orly Airport and about 30 percent of flights at other airports were cancelled on October 19 as a result of the strike. Truck drivers, on their part, staged a “go slow” protest by blocking the highways, while students’ protests disrupted teaching in hundreds of secondary schools. In like manner, the port city of Marseille was littered with garbage due to garbage collectors’ protest. A Toulouse worker, who participated in the demonstration, complained that it would be wrong to keep people waiting till they are 67 before they can receive their pension. “I’ve contributed for 42 years. Isn’t that enough? Can I even climb a ladder any more? At 65 years of age, you wouldn’t be willing to climb a ladder either,” the man said. In spite of the intensity of the demonstrations, Sarkozy showed no sign of letting up with the reform agenda. “This reform had been delayed for too long and cannot be delayed any more. Why? Because the pensions of today and tomorrow’s retirees have to be paid,” he said, explaining that “there are 15 million retirees in France and at the minute that I’m speaking to you pensions of 1.5 million of them are paid by bank loans.”