‘They broke into the house and I panicked and ran and took shelter under the bed,’ said 15 year-old Malka (not her real name), describing the day the Somali Transitional Government forces came to her house. ‘I came out from under the bed and tried to escape but...I was hit from behind with the butt of a gun... I last remember a man holding my neck as another climbed on top of my body. I woke up to yelling and the cries of my mother... I was not taken to hospital because of the fear of stigma by my mother... I have been robbed of the only thing of value a woman possesses. I feel a reject now.’

The 16 days of activism against gender violence between the International Day Against Violence Against Women and 10 December, International Human Rights Day (which will mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), should be opportunities to highlight the achievements of the African and international women’s and human rights movements, such as the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325[2] on women, peace, and security and this year’s Security Council resolution[3] on sexual violence in conflict situations.

Unfortunately, though, urgency demands that we turn our attention to the horrific violence against women in conflicts going on right now around the African continent. One such situation, shamefully ignored by the international media and policy makers, is the brutal armed conflict in Somalia. Escalating fighting between Ethiopian and Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) forces on the one side, and insurgent groups on the other,[1] has had a drastic effect on women and girls like Malka who face rape and other forms of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) and limited or no access to essential healthcare or justice.

Since early 2007 hundreds of thousands of Somalis, including women and girls, have fled their homes in Mogadishu and other locations in fear of their lives. But Somali women also face the risk of rape and other SGBV at the hands of Ethiopian troops, Somali transitional government forces, and unidentified militias who take advantage of the growing lawlessness.

There is increasing evidence of a high prevalence of SGBV in south-central Somalia, despite the stigma and silence that usually surrounds rape and sexual assault. However, the voices of the victims and survivors themselves speak loudest. Their stories tell of violations by all sides. A teenage girl who was kidnapped by unidentified militiamen in Mogadishu told Human Rights Watch researchers in July: ‘[One of the kidnappers] held me by the neck and covered my mouth. I could not breathe. He repeatedly raped me. After a while the other one joined him. The first one raped me for more than an hour while the others were outside playing music in the car. Then they later joined to rape me in turns, including the driver. They raped me up to late evening. I bled profusely.’

A young man told Human Rights Watch that Ethiopian soldiers raped his mother and sisters in Mogadishu following fighting between the transitional government forces and insurgent groups: ‘Some Ethiopians and government soldiers came to our house... The Ethiopians came in by one and started raping [my sisters] and I was sitting there helpless.’

These women and girls have little access either to essential healthcare or to justice. Where could Malka turn after her attack if she had been ready to report it since the attackers were government forces?

The same would seem to be true for many other rape victims and survivors in other areas of south-central Somalia. Aisha Ibrahim Duhulow was stoned to death at the age of 14 in October in Kismayo, a city controlled by the militant Al-Shabaab faction of the insurgency. She was reportedly arrested and convicted of adultery when she tried to report a rape to the authorities. Aisha’s horrific death is likely to discourage rape victims from reporting rape or seeking justice from the Islamist insurgents, who control an increasing swathe of territory.

Malka’s testimony also demonstrates that because of fear of the stigma, rape survivors or their families may not seek services to address the physical and psychological scars that result from SGBV – assuming that healthcare and counselling services exist. In fact, aid workers and human rights
activists in Somalia have been the targets of violence themselves in unprecedented numbers in 2008, leaving many civilians without assistance at a time when Somalia is on the verge of the worst famine since the early 1990s.

The United Nations Security Council should establish an international commission of inquiry to investigate the worst crimes against Somali civilians and identify those responsible, with particular attention to sexual violence. The secretary general should address the situation in Somalia in his June 2009 report to the Security Council on SGBV in conflict situations[2] and should suggest strategies to minimise the susceptibility of women and girls to such violence in Somalia and elsewhere.

United Nations and other humanitarian agencies working in Somalia – or with Somali refugees in the region, particularly Kenya – should ensure that women and girls have access to healthcare, counselling, and timely access to Post-Exposure Prophylaxis to prevent the transmission of HIV to rape survivors.

Most importantly, Somali women’s groups, with support from donors, can play a central role by documenting abuses and changing community attitudes toward survivors.

There is no easy solution to the Somali crisis, or to the wave of attacks by people who know they face no punishment. But regional and international policy makers can help to face the situation by addressing the flawed international policies that have immeasurably worsened the situation. Developing new approaches that prioritise accountability and human rights would be a step in the right direction.

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[2] Paragraph 15 of Security Council resolution 1820 requests that the Secretary-General submit a report to the Security Council by 30 June 2009 on the implementation of the resolution in the context of situations which are on the agenda of the Council, utilising information from available United Nations sources. The resolution requests that the report includes an analysis of the prevalence and trends of sexual violence in situations of armed conflict, proposals for strategies to minimise the susceptibility of women and girls to such violence, and benchmarks for measuring progress in preventing and addressing sexual violence. UN Security Council, Resolution 1820 (2008), adopted by the Security Council at its 5916th meeting, on 19 June 2008, S/RES/1820 (2008), available here [3].

Categories: Comment & analysis [7]
Issue Number: 411 [8]

Article-Summary:
With examples of the considerable risk of sexual violence faced by Somali women from a range of military organisations including the Somali Transitional Government, Ethiopian troops, and local militias, Nada Ali argues that much more needs to be done to ensure that those vulnerable within some of the African continent’s most conflict-torn areas receive adequate protection from abuse. The UN Security Council’s formation of an international commission of inquiry focussing on sexual violence, Al... read more [9]

Category: Gender & Minorities [10]
And what about Somali women?

Country: Mali [12]

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