

Caritas Internationalis Statement for UNHCR Annual Consultation 29 June 2009

Caritas Internationalis says there is a collective failure by governments and UN agencies to protect women and girls in conflict situations from rape and other forms of violence and exploitation.

The humiliation of women by soldiers and civilians as a weapon of war is a common feature in conflicts Caritas works in around the world.

The effects of this violence are devastating. Apart from the physical and psychological damage that rape brings to the individual, there is also a grave risk of unwanted pregnancy and HIV infection. Women victims of violence are often further victimized by being discriminated against. It affects families, communities and villages. Some will never totally recover from this attack to their dignity.

Caritas Internationalis President Cardinal Oscar Rorriguez Maradiaga says that women should be the focus of the work of aid agencies like Caritas in bringing about development and peacebuilding.¹

Caritas says that although the international humanitarian laws are in place that guarantee the protection of civilians, women, and children, they are not being upheld.

Governments and UN agencies must address this failure by improving protection, medical treatment, counselling and means for rehabilitation and compensation. Women should be encouraged to report on the abuses they suffered to start their healing. To do justice to their suffering their perpetrators should be brought to justice.

Caritas works in conflicts around the world, providing help to refugee and displaced women such as food, shelter, hygiene items for pregnancy after a rape, but also trauma counseling, training as community leaders, livelihood trainings and micro-credits.

In Colombia's civil war, women and girls face sexual abuse, forced recruitment and exploitation as cheap laborers. Women and children represent almost half of the IDP and refugee population both among Colombians².

¹ Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, Entretiens avec Eric Valmir, "De la difficulté d'évoquer Dieu dans un monde qui pense ne pas en avoir besoin", Paris 2008p. 89

² 2007 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons, <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/STATISTICS/4852366f2.pdf>

According to the National Reparation and Reconciliation Commission the “typical” victim of the conflict in Colombia is a poor woman, single-head of household, she earns minimum wage, only has minimum primary school level education and has been displaced by violence.

17.7 percent of women in Colombia who'd fled their homes reported the cause as sexual violence.

Many go unreported, partly because of shame, fear of discrimination, but also because the issue of gender-based violence has been completely overlooked under the Justice and Peace law in Colombia.

In Sri Lanka, women and girls who have fled the conflict to go to camps say violence is their chief source of fear. Overcrowding in camps leads to lack of privacy for women and adolescent girls. This creates an environment for abuse.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo's troubled eastern region, 463 rape cases in South Kivu have been reported in the past three months - more than half the number reported in the whole of 2008.

Caritas Internationalis, the global confederation of 164 Catholic charities, promotes integral human development. Namely, an integral approach that takes into consideration the wellbeing of the person and of all people in their different dimensions: economic, social, political, cultural, ecological and spiritual – in order to achieve a just society.

The protection, empowerment and integration of female migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, trafficked people and other forcibly displaced populations and stateless persons are a key concern for Caritas Internationalis.

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