Rape OutRAGE

Why is an army of rapist getting HIV meds, while its victims are left to die?

September 1, 2003 By Anne-christine d'Adesky

AIDS is the enduring legacy of the genocide in Rwanda's 1994 civil war. Sexual violence and mass rape were turned into tools of war against women, as they'd been in the former Yugoslavia and in Haiti. So was HIV. For 100 days, Hutu nationalists slaughtered and mutilated close to 1 million Tutsis and some Hutus who opposed "ethnic cleansing." They also raped 250,000 women and girls, mostly Tutsis—while the world looked away. The attackers took PWAs out of hospitals and packed them into battalions of rapists trained to wield HIV as a weapon. Today, 70 percent of the rape survivors have HIV; many are shunned by family and friends; half are dying in this traumatized nation lacking HIV treatment. The rapes produced 30,000 pregnancies, and many of these orphaned "children of shame" are also HIV positive.

Hutus—including, in a savage irony, the female former head of Rwanda's Ministry of Women's Affairs—are being tried before the UN's International Tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania. But justice has been slow: Only a handful of Tribunal cases have been reviewed; the 100,000 backlog could take generations to try. Even more outrageous, the tribunal provides antiretroviral drugs and care for accused rapists who are PWAs, but denies this to the raped women. How can this be? Tribunal officials say they are responsible for caring for the detained defendants but not their victims.

The Rwandan crisis is the most extreme example of the links between war and displacement, rape and HIV—underscoring the vulnerability of women and girls. Activists have a moral obligation to intervene where we didn't in '94. Let's expose this indefensible argument by an international body that claims to uphold principles of justice and human rights. Let's demand reparations in the form of HIV drugs for Rwanda's rape survivors. It's a realistic goal: Legal precedent and international funding exist. The most important—and missing—ingredient is political will. Instead, history is repeating itself next door: Rwandan soldiers are raping Congolese women in the regional conflict over diamonds and power. Our silence is deafening—and eerily familiar.

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