



Conflict-Related Gender Based Violence in Tigray

Assita Kanko, MEP. Opening Key-note Address : Webinar on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray

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25.05.2021 - Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I am honored and humbled to be here, and to speak to you on this urgent issue.

The testimonies and accounts we will hear today will be heartbreaking. They will make us angry; they will make us sad.

We will feel powerless to protect these women. The stories will at times, seem too horrific to comprehend. But if these women can survive these horrific attacks, then we have a duty to listen and to speak up.

Despite the hard truths that we will hear today, we must commit to a message of hope, and the promise of action.

Undoubtedly, the world has been distracted of late.

A distraction that has provided a cloak of impunity for the perpetrators of these crimes.

But the international community is very capable of addressing more than one crisis or urgent situation at a time.

The safety, health, and futures of thousands of women depends upon it.

It is reported that the women being raped in the Tigray region are aged anywhere between 8 and 72.

These violations are said to be widespread. They are intentional and deliberate. Aid organizations believe that the number of women affected is far higher than reported.

The rapes are being carried out in front of family, husbands, and children. The rapes can last for days, and often inflict life threatening injuries.

Those who speak out know they are placing themselves in danger. There is no mercy or humanity in these barbaric acts.

Sir Mark Andrew Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator described the attacks in Eritrea,

“as a means to humiliate, terrorize, and traumatize an entire population today and into the next generation.”

I have said many times, it is beyond comprehension that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, has overseen such destruction, tyranny and depravation.

The people of Tigray and Ethiopia were - until recently, living normal lives. They now risk mass starvation and live in constant fear and enforced isolation.

Today there should be one clear message, that the international community must come together to condemn these atrocities, but that more importantly – they must act.

Governments and institutions have always been cautious to use certain terms: genocide and rape as a weapon of war.

But we mustn't be afraid to use these terms if they accurately describe what is taking place. These words allow for consequences and repercussions for perpetrators.

Sometimes the world views war as the theatre of men.

But it is often women that pay an equal or greater price behind the scenes:

Loss of economic empowerment, rape, forced prostitution, starvation, backsteps in social equality.

Sexual violence against women and girls has been used as a weapon of war for centuries.

The lasting damage clear to see. We saw it with the women of Rwanda, South Korea, Yugoslavia; and these are just the examples of the last century.

But the inaction of the international community makes it seem as though we have learned nothing. President Biden, the G7, the UN, and the EU have all condemned and expressed concern over what is happening,

But words are not enough to make the suffering of women stop. Condemnation is important, but it's not enough to make families sleep soundly tonight in Tigray.

There must be concerted and coordinated international pressure and targeted sanctions. These atrocities must come to an end, and soldiers and their commanders must be prosecuted.

Rape, like war - echoes through the generations, its pain doesn't end, with the end of a conflict.

It is clear, that in order to gain justice for the women of Tigray, the words on the pages of our international laws and treaties must protect women.

Systematic rape by soldiers cannot be treated as a secondary crime of war.

It is only by showing there is no impunity for human rights violators, that these women can begin to move on with their lives.

The fear of being raped or having been raped, has sent thousands of women into hiding.

The economic, family, and social consequences of this are huge. Women's fear of going to work or to the shops is causing economic deprivation and hunger.

It takes great courage for any woman to speak about her experience of rape or sexual assault, especially in traditional and conservative families and communities.

Their bravery must be met by political bravery from Western democracies. The soldiers in Tigray may have tried to impose their control, but they can never take away these women's strength.

Now it is up to us, to try and give them back their power. Every voice matters in urging the international community to act.

We cannot waste another moment in trying to stop this crime against humanity. There is more than one way to commit genocide.

Indeed, the damage of rape as a weapon of war, is as powerful as any gun or bomb. As the armies and authorities seek to silence these women and their communities,

We, therefore, must lend them our voices, and those voices must be determined and loud.

Thank you.

Assita Kanko, 25 May 2021