Action pour les Droits Solidaires

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Advocacy Paper:

Addressing Persistent Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Territories under AFC/M23 Control

Action pour les Droits Solidaires (ADS)
Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo
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1. Introduction

In February 2025, Action pour les Droits Solidaires (ADS) submitted an advocacy paper to the Office of the Deputy Governor entitled *"Addressing Cases of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Territories under the Administration of AFC/M23."*

The paper highlighted the alarming scale of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) affecting women and girls as a result of the conflict and proposed a number of priority measures aimed at strengthening prevention, protection, and response mechanisms.

The recommendations emphasized the importance of community-based protection systems, including the strengthening of collaboration between local civil society organizations, women-led organizations, and humanitarian actors promoting women's rights including supporting of survivors of violence and vulnerable communities.

Particular emphasis was placed on strengthening referral pathways for medical, psychosocial, and legal support services, improving community awareness on prevention of sexual violence, and reinforcing coordination between humanitarian actors and community protection mechanisms.

However, one year later, available evidence indicates that these recommendations have not yet translated into consistent protection outcomes for women and girls living in territories currently under AFC/M23 control.

2. Continued prevalence of sexual violence

Citizens report changes in the overall security environment since the takeover of several territories by AFC/M23. In some areas, reductions in certain forms of insecurity, including armed robberies and extortion at checkpoints, have been observed.

However, these developments have not translated into adequate protection for all segments of the population.

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Women and girls, in particular, continue to face serious protection risks, including sexual and gender-based violence. While some aspects of insecurity have decreased, the absence of effective protection mechanisms and access to services means that women and girls remain exposed to sexual violence, exploitation, and abuse.

In addition, limited access to functioning judicial and protection systems in territories under AFC/M23 control has contributed to a significant protection and accountability gap. Survivors often face considerable barriers in reporting abuses or accessing appropriate support services.

During recent field activities, ADS staff visited survivors of sexual violence in Lushagala, a former IDP camp whose residents are now living within surrounding host communities. Although the camps have closed, the insecurity and vulnerability faced by women and girls persists.

Survivors reported that they continue to face similar threats to those experienced during displacement.

One survivor shared the following testimony:

> *"Many of us live in host families; others guard plots left by benefactors. But we face many challenges. FDLR rebels leave Virunga Park at night to attack us. If they find no supplies, they rape all the women in the house starting with the youngest. A week ago they entered our neighbors' house and raped an 8-year-old girl and another aged 10. We sleep every night with a female condom near the bed, or sometimes wear it all night because we know it could be our turn."*

This testimony reflects the daily reality faced by many women and girls who remain exposed to sexual violence.

At the same time, concerns regarding abuses committed by armed actors continue to be raised at the international level. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recently stated that there are allegations of "sexual violence committed by M23."

These concerns further highlight the urgent need to strengthen survivor-centered protection mechanisms and humanitarian response systems.

3. Why immediate action is needed

Sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict settings is not only a grave violation of human rights; it is also a driver of long-term social instability.

Where improvements in security conditions do not translate into tangible protection for women and girls, peace remains fragile and incomplete.

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When survivors lack timely access to protection and services:

⇒ communities lose trust in protection systems
⇒ survivors suffer long-term trauma and marginalization
⇒ cycles of violence and impunity deepen
⇒ prospects for sustainable recovery and social stability are undermined

In particular, access to life-saving medical care within the first 72 hours following sexual violence remains critical. Survivors require urgent access to clinical services, including post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), emergency contraception, psychosocial support, etc.

Ensuring that survivors are able to access these services in a timely and safe manner is therefore a central priority of the humanitarian protection response.

Strengthening community-based protection mechanisms, particularly through women-led organizations and grassroots civil society groups, is essential to ensuring that survivors can safely access available services and support.

All actors with influence over the situation including; parties controlling territory, the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and international humanitarian partners share responsibility in ensuring that civilians, particularly women and girls, can access protection and assistance.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Recommendations to parties controlling territory

Actors exercising control over territories have a responsibility under international humanitarian principles to ensure that civilians are able to access protection and humanitarian assistance.

ADS therefore encourages authorities controlling territories to:

1. **Facilitate humanitarian access for GBV response services**: Ensure that humanitarian actors and local NGOs are able to operate safely and reach communities affected by sexual violence.
2. **Support community-based protection initiatives**: Enable the work of local civil society organizations and women-led groups that play a frontline role in identifying risks, supporting survivors, and strengthening prevention efforts within communities.
3. **Prevent sexual violence and protect civilians**: Take measures to prevent acts of sexual violence and reinforce respect for the protection of civilians.
4. **Promote safe referral pathways to life-saving services**: Ensure that survivors can safely access medical facilities and humanitarian service

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providers capable of delivering emergency care within the critical 72-hour window following incidents of sexual violence.

5. **Engage constructively with humanitarian actors**: Support dialogue and coordination with humanitarian organizations working to strengthen community protection and survivor assistance.

4.2 Recommendations to the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo

As the sovereign authority responsible for protecting its citizens, the Government of the DRC should:

1. **Strengthen national GBV response mechanisms**: Expand access to medical, psychosocial, and legal services for survivors in conflict-affected regions.
2. **Support community-based protection systems**: Recognize and strengthen the role of local NGOs and women-led organizations that provide frontline protection and assistance to survivors.
3. **Reinforce access to legal aid services for survivors**: Support civil society organizations that provide legal assistance to vulnerable survivors seeking justice and protection.
4. **Address protection gaps affecting displaced populations and host communities**: Strengthen protection measures and social support systems for communities affected by displacement and armed conflict.

4.3 Recommendations to the International Community

International actors including the United Nations, donors, and diplomatic partners play a crucial role in supporting protection efforts.

ADS calls on the international community to:

1. **Increase support to local civil society organizations**, particularly women-led organizations that play a frontline role in survivor support and community protection.
2. **Expand survivor-centered services**, including medical care, psychosocial support, and economic reintegration programs for survivors.
3. **Support coordinated humanitarian protection responses**, including improved access to life-saving services and strengthened referral pathways.

5. Conclusion

The persistence of sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict territories demonstrates that improvements in certain aspects of security alone are not sufficient to guarantee protection for all members of society.

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Women and girls continue to face significant risks of sexual and gender-based violence, and many survivors remain unable to access the protection and services they urgently require.

Strengthening community-based protection systems, survivor-centered services, and the role of women-led organizations is therefore essential to improving protection outcomes.

Action pour les Droits Solidaires calls upon all stakeholders to take concrete steps to ensure that protection, dignity, and access to assistance for women and girls remain at the center of humanitarian response efforts.

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