DRC protesters demand justice over unprosecuted rapes and murders

October 2, 2020

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/02/drc-protestors-demand-justice-over-unprosecuted-rapes-and-murders>

Women led thousands of people in demonstrations in four cities across the Democratic Republic of the Congo on Thursday, demanding justice for historic murders and rapes committed in the east of the country.

Organisers said police beat protesters in Kisangani, one of the cities, as they marked a decade since the UN documented hundreds of crimes in DRC between 1993 and 2003 that have not been prosecuted.

At least 3,500 survivors of sexual violence joined the protests and hundreds of lawyers fronted the march in Bukavu, the base of peace laureate Dr Denis Mukwege, whose Denis Mukwege Foundation backed the demonstrations.

Mukwege was unable to attend himself, having faced death threats for his campaigns against the violence committed during the two civil wars that took place during that period.

Mukwege told Agence France-Presse: “To deny that there have been crimes against humanity and war crimes in the Democratic Republic of Congo – even to deny there has been genocide in DRC – is to be in bad faith.”

His spokeswoman, Maud-Salomé Ekila, added: “We have impunity here in the Congo because we don’t have justice … the perpetrators know they can act like they want.”

She estimated that 5,000 people had attended the march in Bukavu, the eastern city in South Kivu province, where Mukwege’s Panzi hospital has specialised in treating survivors of sexual violence in conflict.

“It is impossible to build peace in this country without justice. You have survivors of this war who are traumatised, they didn’t even have the occasion to bury their family, they don’t know where they are,” said Ekila.

A petition signed by the Mukwege Foundation and DRC’s Movement of Survivors was delivered to UN and African Union leaders this week, calling for the 2010 report to be the basis for ensuring justice for the crimes.

Protesters also called on the UN to provide the names of alleged perpetrators who were not identified in the original report.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said in a joint statement on Thursday that the lack of justice allowed similar abuses to continue unpunished.

The UN secretary-general, António Guterres, warned last month of deadly violence in the border areas of Ituri and North Kivu provinces. The UN said in June that 1,300 people had been killed over the previous eight months.

“Widespread impunity continues to reign in Congo and the wider region, contributing to the recurrence of killings and other serious crimes,” said Amnesty’s director for east and southern Africa, Deprose Muchena.

The UN’s 2010 “mapping” report was commissioned after the discovery of mass graves in 2005 and focused on several outbreaks of violence that involved Congolese forces, rebel groups and foreign forces. It proposed the creation of an international criminal court for DRC.

Ekila said protesters were beaten on Thursday by police in Kisangani, where many of the abuses investigated by the UN occurred. She said the authorities issued a notice on Wednesday refusing to authorise the protest.

Last month, the UN redeployed troops to protect Mukwege, who had been receiving death threats. The Nobel peace laureate has been guarded by UN solders since 2012, but the troops were withdrawn in May after an outbreak of Covid-19.