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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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● (1305)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Order, please. Welcome to the 87th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is Tuesday, June 11, 2013.

[*English*]

We are televised today, so the usual rules of good behaviour that apply to televised sessions apply today.

We have with us today as a witness Jocelyn Kelly, the director of the women in war program at Harvard University.

We're returning to a study that we looked at some time ago—it's our first hearing in quite a while—on the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, specifically the systematic use of sexual violence against women as a weapon of war.

Ms. Kelly, we're very glad to have you here today. I know that the clerk will already have explained the general outlines of how these things work. You have as much time as you need for your presentation, but we usually encourage witnesses to stay around the 10-minute mark. The amount of time we have left when you're finished will determine how much time we have for each of the six rounds of questions and answers that you'll get from the members of the subcommittee.

Please feel free to begin any time.

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly (Director, Women in War Program, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, As an Individual): Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank the subcommittee for this opportunity to address you on the issue of sexual violence against women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

My name is Jocelyn Kelly. I'm the director of the women in war program at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, an interdisciplinary research group at Harvard University that examines how to bring evidence-based practices into complex crises.

I've seen the transcripts of the other substantive sessions on the Congo and know that the members of the subcommittee are already very knowledgeable about the situation there. It's a rare honour to be invited here today to speak about such an important issue to those who are so clearly committed to this problem.

I've worked in international crises and disaster response since 2004 and have specifically worked in DRC since 2007 as a public health researcher, using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. During my time there I've worked not only with survivors of sexual violence but also with current rebel combatants from a number of groups and with demobilized former soldiers including former child soldiers. This has provided me an unusual opportunity to look at the complex issues in DRC from many angles.

The work of the women in war program has been possible because of the close partnerships we have with local organizations that undertake heroic work, including the Panzi Hospital, the Centre d'assistance médico-psychosociale, known as CAMPS, and the Eastern Congo Initiative, to name but a few.

Our program is committed to looking at gendered issues in areas of political instability. We try to conduct action-based research with local partners in an effort to inform programming and policy using the voices and recommendations of the true experts in a situation: those who are themselves affected.

In DRC our most recent projects have focused on a number of topics, including the stigma that survivors of sexual violence face in their families and communities after rape, the issues faced by children born as a result of sexual violence, the demobilization and reintegration of former child soldiers, and human rights assessments with a particular focus on women's rights in artisanal mining towns. I know we cannot even begin to cover all of the results from all of these projects. Instead, I'd like to try to cover two broad points in this presentation. I'll try to synthesize our more detailed research results into a set of more general observations about the situation in DRC, especially as it relates to women's issues. Next, I'll propose a set of recommendations, again, supported by those affected by these issues, in the hope that these will help the committee in its work.

We're here to discuss sexual violence against women, used systematically as a weapon of war in DRC. To do this, I'd like to start with one of my favourite quotes from feminist Gloria Steinem. At a presentation of hers I attended a few years ago, she said that when we discuss women's issues, we call it culture, and when we discuss men's issues we call it economics. The committee has already recognized what many people still struggle to realize, that sexual violence in conflict anywhere is not just a women's issue and it's not just a cultural issue, but a political issue and a human rights issue, and it's at the core of the peace and security agenda.

The DRC conflict can be intimidating to understand. People can get lost in an alphabet soup of factions of armed groups and subgroups and shifting political and military loyalties. It's a complicated situation, but there are lessons that have emerged through our work and the work of many dedicated researchers. First, and perhaps very obviously, wounds resulting from sexual and gender-based violence are multi-dimensional in scope. This pervasive and often public violence not only affects the individual survivor but also shatters family and community relationships. The stigmatization and isolation of survivors from their social networks, the witnessing of public sexual violence by members of a survivor's family and community, and the changes in social norms because of displacement are all destabilizing effects of sexual violence on communities.

A complicated problem requires a holistic approach. It is important to provide integrated medical, mental health, and economic support services. Holistic care, either through referral mechanisms or through integrating different services in the same organization, is required in order to address this issue.

● (1310)

Second, people focus on the problems that women in the Congo face, but interestingly enough many of the women we speak to are most concerned about their children and their families. We must take an integrated family-based approach to addressing this problem. Children are especially reliant on a myriad of critical social structures—family, religious communities, education, and health systems—in order to ensure their health and development, but these are the very systems that have been undermined or destroyed as a result of the pervasive insecurity in the DRC.

Children are affected both directly and indirectly by sexual violence. Services must take a family-centred approach to help women address not only their personal needs resulting from rape, but also the needs of their families, including children as well.

The Congolese government has made a commitment to ensure free education for children up to primary school. It's a promise that has currently been unmet. You would be surprised by the number of women who have suffered life-threatening injuries and have had everything they owned taken away from them, and when asked what they would like to see change in the future, say that the one thing they want is education for their children.

Another consequence of the conflict is the destabilization of economic systems. We must provide context appropriate income-generating solutions for women and men. We must encourage community-led implementation of farming, trade cooperatives, and micro-lending. And we must provide security for the women who are ready to work, to undertake the activities they choose.

Our work with the World Bank in artisanal mining towns in the DRC illustrates the importance of this issue. Women often go to mining towns to seek the economic opportunity that is all too rare in Congo. There they face horrific outcomes, and are often marginalized into undertaking sex work instead of fulfilling their right to undertake fair-paying work in mining towns.

There is a need to support local mining activities in a sustainable way to harness the economic promise in these areas. To do so, we must address corruption and fraud in the mining sector, provide technical assistance for the modernization of artisanal mining, engage in education on Congolese law and the mining code, and promote grassroots, inclusive economic cooperatives.

Finally, violence is cyclical. I've interviewed more than a hundred soldiers from a number of rebel groups during my time in Congo. We think of combatants as perpetrators of violence who commit monstrous acts that most of us find impossible to understand. However, many of these soldiers were forced to join armed groups through kidnapping or intense pressure, and they often joined at very young ages. Many soldiers joined with the idea of fighting against the atrocities committed against themselves and their families, but after joining, these men and women found themselves perpetrating the same crimes they had themselves suffered.

We see a recurring pattern to the insecurity in the DRC. Many of the rebel soldiers we have talked to have gone through a revolving door of demobilization multiple times. When I was in the DRC last summer, our research was interrupted when were interviewing former child soldiers who were actually leaving our research project to rejoin the fighting against M23.

Since the conflict is now two decades long, there is an entire generation of young people who have never experienced peace. Funding for the demobilization of rebel groups and integration of soldiers into their communities must be a part of other services, and requires long-term commitments from governments and donors.

Combatants need ongoing psychosocial services in addition to simply giving up their guns. I heard a psychologist talk about this as “mental disarmament”. Undertaking this work will help ensure that military mindsets and predation of civilians does not occur after ostensible peace processes are undertaken.

Despite the complexity of the situation in the DRC, there are things we can be sure of: peace must be a foundation for longer-term sustainable improvements in the situation in Congo. Moreover, women's issues are political issues. Sexual violence and other human rights violations undermine peace and security in Congo. Sexual violence in conflict is not inevitable. I'll say it again because it's something that many of us still struggle to understand. We think of rape as old as war itself, yet many remarkable public health and political science researchers are undertaking groundbreaking work to show that sexual violence in conflict is not inevitable. Since it is not inevitable, we are charged to address this issue and to prevent it.

● (1315)

This can be done through attainable but difficult measures, including changing people's attitudes to women's rights, ending the impunity of military and civilian perpetrators, undertaking security sector reform with the national military, providing fair and equal employment and educational opportunities for women and men, and pursuing lasting peace and stability in Congo.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the entire committee, for your continued dedication to this important issue.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kelly.

We're going to begin our questioning with Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you for your testimony, Ms. Kelly.

I'm sure I speak for my colleagues when I tell you that our commitment to violence against women is unequivocal. We consider this matter just as important as violence against men or against children. You have our commitment in that regard.

You mentioned the lack of fulfilment by the DRC of their promise of free education. What do you see as their level of commitment in preventing sexual violence against women by the Congolese army? What more could the international community do to move them in the right direction, if that's what's needed?

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: The Congolese government's commitment to addressing sexual violence is a difficult matter. Any commitment, however, is strengthened by sustained pressure from partners who are truly engaged. The Congolese government is made up of remarkable individuals, many of whom have personally been affected by the conflict. However, I think their political will needs to be strengthened. It needs to be the foundation for addressing this issue. I would like to see a more sustained and committed effort by the Congolese government, and I think this can be promoted by continued pressure from countries like the United States and Canada.

● (1320)

Mr. David Sweet: We have a ways to go.

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: Yes.

Mr. David Sweet: I'm going to ask you a multi-part question that is important for our evidence on this study.

A new intervention brigade with a mandate to reduce the threat of violence against civilians was created in March 2013 under UN Security Council resolution 2098. It addresses the sexual and gender-based violence against children posed by both Congolese and foreign armed groups, and it attempts to neutralize a number of specific armed groups.

In your view, how is the deployment of the UN's new intervention brigade likely to affect the situation in eastern DRC? To what extent do you think this new force may contribute to reducing levels of conflict-related sexual violence in the DRC? Do you have any suggestions for the international community regarding ways to improve the likelihood that the intervention brigade will have a positive impact on security in eastern DRC?

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: As a public health researcher, I sometimes hesitate to comment authoritatively on some of the UN undertakings. However, I would say that many of the interventions still need to be integrated with local and national efforts. While the UN's efforts in DRC are admirable, it's still an enormous country, no matter how large the number of troops, and the true effort needs to come from the political will of the Congolese government. I see that as a more sustainable avenue for changing things on the ground. I think this can be achieved through security sector reform together with better pay and training for Congolese troops.

Mr. David Sweet: Do you have any concern that the actions of the intervention force will cause reprisals on innocent people?

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: It would be difficult for me to comment authoritatively on that. We see many unintended consequences as a result of actions in Congo, so I would not rule it out.

Mr. David Sweet: You've been on the ground for a while. We heard some positive testimony some time ago about the effects of NGO and government efforts to change the culture, particularly in regard to how the communities respond to women who are raped and become pregnant and then have children. Is that still progressing? Do you still see positive signs that the broader community is embracing these victims rather than shunning them, as was happening before?

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: Absolutely. I think that was one of the most troubling and incomprehensible things that we saw in Congo. Women were being blamed for a rape that was clearly not their fault. One of the local partners I mentioned,

[*Translation*]

the Medical Psycho-Social Help Centre,

[*English*]

works in Bukavu, but radiates to some of the most remote areas in Congo. They have done heroic work trying to change attitudes. I know many NGOs are undertaking those efforts. We certainly see changes in attitudes and cultural norms related to the way survivors of sexual violence are treated. When women are able to earn incomes and become vital economic actors in their families and communities, I think it will help them regain the dignity and agency necessary for their acceptance. While we recognize that acceptance should occur no matter what, we also see that income-generating programs, in addition to changing mindsets and cultural norms, can be a powerful way to address the stigma against a survivor of sexual violence.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacob, you have the floor.

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank Ms. Kelly for having come today to make her presentation, which was very eloquent.

My first question concerns NGOs.

Some NGOs fear that their cooperation with the UN ties them to the military action of the new intervention brigade. They fear that they will be refused access to some regions.

● (1325)

The Chair: Mr. Jacob, there is an interpretation problem. Perhaps you can start over, and I will give you the necessary time.

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Many groups think that this UN military brigade will lead to retaliation against humanitarian workers.

Do you have concerns about the impact that the intervention brigade may have on access to humanitarian aid as well as the safety of humanitarian workers and the people they serve?

[*English*]

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: Thank you for that very important comment and question.

As someone coming from the research community, I would hesitate to speak on behalf of programmatic NGOs working in the area. Unfortunately, I think I should probably leave that question to the programmers who are doing work on the ground every day.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

On March 18, 2013, Bosco Ntaganda, a suspected leader of M23, went to the Embassy of the United States in Rwanda and was transferred to face criminal charges at the International Criminal Court.

In your opinion, what led Bosco Ntaganda to go to the American embassy to face a trial at the International Criminal Court? What will be the impact of his surrender on the current conflict and on M23?

[*English*]

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: While it's an important question, I would, once again, hesitate to comment on the motivations leading up to going to the American embassy. I apologize, but I think I'm going to stay within my area of expertise, which is the impact of sexual violence on survivors in Congo.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: I will ask an easier question.

Are there measures the Government of Canada could take in the DRC to prevent or decrease sexual violence, or even make it disappear?

[*English*]

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: Thank you for that question. I certainly do find that a bit easier to respond to, although naturally it's a difficult question as well. I think Canada has undertaken a remarkable commitment to working in DRC, and I congratulate you on your efforts through CIDA.

One of the things we've seen in DRC that is not necessarily a reflection of Canada but of funding mechanisms in general is that NGOs, local organizations and even multilateral organizations, struggle with the fact that they're trying to undertake long-term sustained efforts but funding often comes in fits and starts and attention varies between different efforts at different times. Here, one of the challenges, for instance, in the demobilization and reintegration efforts was that funding would come in six-month cycles, but clearly, soldiers needed much longer-term services in order to be able to fully reintegrate into civilian life after spending decades sometimes in armed groups.

What I would say is that Canada can lead not only by example, but also by supporting a kind of sustained multi-donor mechanism that can create funding that is targeted to important questions that last for many years, instead of in short funding cycles that create disruption of services.

Another thing that I would say is unique to this setting is that Canada has the opportunity to create political pressure on the Congolese government to fulfill some of its promises, and to continue to push for political solutions to sustained problems.

● (1330)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Do I still have a bit of time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes, you have enough time to ask another question.

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Ms. Kelly, your association has done research on the motives of combatants who commit acts of sexual violence in eastern DRC.

In your opinion, through what mechanisms are former members of militias integrated into the Congolese army?

[*English*]

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: One of the projects we have undertaken is looking specifically at the experiences, attitudes, and motivation of non-state combatants, including especially the Mai Mai militia. We found a number of practices within armed groups that promote sexual violence against civilians. One is the depersonalization of combatants; they often undergo a sustained and very violent initiation into armed groups that leads to the sense of dehumanization.

Another thing we've seen is an attitude that civilians are there to be preyed upon. One quote we often heard from soldiers is that civilians are “fields to be harvested”. There is the sense that if soldiers have given up so much to take up arms to protect the Congo, they have the right to take what they want from civilians.

We also see combatants drawing lines among different kinds of human rights abuses. They avoid certain types of rape that they see as especially bad, for instance, rape of the very young or very old or forced incest. By separating rape into evil rape and okay rape, they justify undertaking certain forms of abuses against women and can reconcile that in their own mind.

It's an interesting finding, in the sense that we can learn about how soldiers think about sexual violence in some of these subgroups. The work we undertook was only with certain subgroups of one militia. As you know, there are many in DRC. What's very true is that there's a varying landscape of motivations for undertaking sexual violence in Congo. Often it is not an order per se that comes from a military commander, but it is either condoned or people look the other way, or it's looked at as a way for soldiers to exert control over civilian populations or to take what they want. Many rebel commanders have no interest in trying to prevent rape among their troops.

This is definitely an area of research that we found interesting and points to potential intervention points. One is something as simple as saying that all rape is rape and that you must change attitudes around the way that combatants look at women. Another is to undertake more effective disarmament and demobilization. Something that I think is very much of concern, and which many people have talked about in DRC, is that when combatant groups are integrated into the national army, it's poor and incomplete integration.

At one point I was in a town called Walungu and was talking to those I thought were rebel soldiers, as they identified themselves as part of a rebel group. Then at some point I noticed that a number of them were wearing national military-issue uniforms. I asked them about this, and they said that reintegration happened about a year ago. But at no point did they identify themselves as national military, nor did they think of themselves that way. They continued to behave in the way they had as a non-state armed group.

I think we see a deep need for more effective demobilization and reintegration programming, as well as much more effective security sector reform within the Congolese national military. That includes putting soldiers into barracks so they're not always around the civilian population, and providing more sustained salary support so soldiers don't have this mindset of needing to take what they can get from civilians because they don't get anything from the government. It certainly involves an enormous amount of training and attitudinal change.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you, Ms. Kelly.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jacob.

[*English*]

Nina Grewal, it's your turn.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms. Kelly, for your time here and your presentation. Certainly we all appreciate that.

We know that you are the director of the women in war program at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and that you've spent almost five years in the DRC and in speaking about combatants and non-state armed groups and conflict-related sexual violence.

In a recent blog posting you reflected on the complex process of trying to understand one of the most incomprehensible human behaviours. Could you discuss some of your experiences and give your reflections on spending some five years in the Democratic Republic of Congo?

● (1335)

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: Certainly.

I think, again, this gets to the work with non-state armed combatants, many of whom are perpetrators of the violence that we're trying to understand here today. One thing that struck me as particularly heartbreaking while working in DRC is that when you talk to many of these rebel commanders and combatants, you're trying to understand what many of us think of as entirely incomprehensible behaviour. It is very intense abuse of civilians and sexual violence against women. Many of us find it incredibly difficult even to hear the descriptions. For me, I think the most challenging thing was recognizing that many of these soldiers had actually witnessed and undergone the very violence that they were then propagating. This is one of the core aspects of the conflict in DRC and one of the most heartbreaking.

Again, returning to that question of the cycle of violence, we often saw both men and women actually joining armed groups as young girls and boys. While some of them were kidnapped and some of them faced intense pressure to join, others joined out of a sense of anger or wanting to protect their communities from the violence that their own families had undergone.

One girl actually talked very eloquently about how she joined a Mai Mai rebel group because she had watched her mother and sister being raped. So her decision to become a soldier was informed by the fact that she had seen this violence occur in her household and she wanted to take up arms in order both to take revenge and to protect others from having to undergo this.

The most heartbreaking thing is that once in an armed group, many soldiers face incredibly horrific and dehumanizing conditions that would challenge our human understanding. I think that changes people and their systematic approaches to creating soldiers who are able to abuse civilians.

This gets us back to the question of how to mentally demobilize soldiers who often have no concept of how to live in civilian communities. While we think that taking away guns means disarmament, what we find is that soldiers who are put back into civilian communities still exhibit the same behaviours they did while they were combatants, involving violence, taking what you want, and preying on civilians. This is incredibly destabilizing for communities in DRC.

Again we get back to that question of how you demobilize the combatants who need to be demobilized. That's through long-term, sustained psychosocial services that are also linked to economic support. Many combatants find that not only can they not find a job, but they don't actually have the social skills to make it in civilian communities. They simply have not learned those skills. Services need to be geared to providing those capacities.

In addition some soldiers actually do choose to remain soldiers and join the national army. However, right now that is not always a positive or sustainable option for getting a salary, making money, and behaving like an honourable soldier. What I think is most interesting in speaking to many of these combatants is that there is this sense of, or longing for, honour and discipline and a sense of structure. It's just not something that they are able to achieve in their current situations.

So if the Congolese government undertook to create a disciplined, well-paid military, there would be an enormous amount of interest from combatants who have a desire to be in an organization like that. Unfortunately, right now that's just simply not the case.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Ms. Kelly, in a recent report you wrote, "Characterizing Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo", you stated that one in three women reported being rejected by their husbands, and one in 15 report being rejected by their communities after rape. You continue to say that the stigma they face as survivors of sexual violence can be as traumatic as the attack itself. Can you explain how sexual violence is detrimental to human rights in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in addition to the emotional effects of sexual violence?

● (1340)

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: Absolutely, and thank you so much for taking the time to read our report. I would just make a note that those statistics do come from a smaller survey, so it's not necessarily a population-based survey. Those were numbers we found in a smaller clinic-based sample of women who reported experiencing sexual violence. I do think those numbers are reflective of other organizations who do find that roughly one in three women faces actual social isolation or full-on rejection from their own families as a result of experiencing sexual violence. A number of other women actually feel forced to leave their own communities as a result of the negative attitudes toward women who have undergone rape.

As you can imagine, this exposes women to dire cycles of vulnerability without a family structure, with no way to earn money, and who are often taking care of children. These women are forced to live on the streets and create a living on their own. Often, this forces them tragically to turn to transactional sex, or leaves them being passed from hand to hand, from relative to relative, with nowhere to go.

One thing that's interesting and shows the linkages between different aspects of this conflict is that sometimes women who are rejected by their families end up in these artisanal mining towns, because they are the few places that women can go with the hope or promise of economic opportunity. They are places where many women feel like they don't need families to be able to make it. There we very much see this cycle of vulnerability where women who do travel to mining towns often have no other option but to engage in transactional sex work instead of being able to undertake other forms of employment.

One of the things that women told us was that as hard as it may be to understand, the stigma can actually be more traumatic than the rape itself because it has lifelong repercussions. In a highly social society where women are often sadly defined by their relationships with men, being expelled from a family or a community means that they're left with literally no support structures to rely on. It was very poignant to hear women talk about that.

Again, tying things into some of the other issues we've talked about, women really saw education, both for themselves and their children, as a way to lift themselves out of some of these cycles of vulnerability.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Thank you.

Do I have any more time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: No, unfortunately you don't.

Mr. Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I was going to ask a general question about the renewed round of fighting, but I think I'll go to some of the initiatives the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative has undertaken and has information on. My question follows up Nina Grewal's one about the prevalence of forced marriage amongst women and girls to fighters—what has been referred to as bush wives—and sexual slavery in the DRC.

What about the problems of the re-integrations of these women and their children as a result of the forced marriage problem?

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: Thank you for this wonderful question.

This is an issue that we've looked at closely and one that is extraordinarily important. What will hopefully change, as part of the wider women, peace and security agenda, is an understanding that demobilization programs traditionally have been targeted at male combatants. There was an assumption that women were simply not part of armed groups. We now recognize that this is absolutely not the case; there are often large numbers of women associated with non-state armed groups throughout eastern DRC. Many of these women are truly sexual slaves, although some have chosen to join or identify with the armed group they're in.

As you can imagine, many of these women also have children during their time with armed groups. Often, they face dire medical issues upon demobilization. However, we see that DDR programs—disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs—are simply not geared to addressing the needs of women. Often, girls simply don't receive the services that men do. They don't feel safe in the camps created for demobilizing combatants because they don't have a space dedicated to them.

We see that people don't have the capacity to address the health and reproductive issues that women face as a result of their time in armed groups and that many women are providers for a number of children when they demobilize.

One way to address this challenge is to think of ways of creating programming that explicitly addresses the needs and experiences of women who've been in these armed groups, from a health, psychosocial, and economic perspective. Currently, that is an enormous gap in programming.

● (1345)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Let me also relate it to how the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative works. There have been increased attacks on human rights defenders who have been engaged in issues of sexual violence. There was also a failed assassination attempt of the director of the Panzi hospital. In fact, you've been working with them as well. Can you give us some insight into the situation of human rights offenders at this point and the attacks upon them?

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: I think this is an area of enormous concern. As many of you know, Dr. Mukwege, who is the director of Panzi Hospital, is truly the hero at the forefront of the issue of sexual violence in DRC and has dedicated his life to helping women there. He did face an assassination attempt recently, and despite that has returned to Congo to continue his work.

I think it's a reflection of a deeper problem relating to human rights and DRC. While you have some heroes who undertake work with complete disregard for their personal safety, this is simply not a safe situation for people to work in. What I think it relates to is the broader issue of the fact that peace and stability must be a foundation for other efforts.

I've seen clinics and schools built and I've returned months later to find them rubble, or washed away, or abandoned because of a recent attack. I think that in order for true progress to occur in Congo, we need to think about how to create a relatively sustained peace where people like Dr. Mukwege can undertake their work knowing they'll wake up the next day and have the ability to continue.

I think, frankly, it probably reflects to some extent a disregard for human rights and certain wider political structures.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: This was going to be my original question, but I thought it too broad. I'll just take it up right now where you left off, because we've had renewed fighting in the Congo, a U.N. Security Council resolution, then discussions between the government and the rebels, and now reportedly peace talks and the like. Number one, are women involved in the peace talks and in the peace-building process? What do you see as the prospect for this latest round of perspective peace-building attempts?

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: I always remain hopeful. I think peace building has a terrible track record in involving women. I think one of the statistics from U.N. Women is that only 16% of all peace negotiations have involved women at any point.

I think this is an opportunity for us to change that. I think with Security Council resolutions 1325 and 1820 and continuing such resolutions, we are really at an exciting frontier for the women, peace, and security agenda. I think one of the best ways to demonstrate the commitment to this would be to have women at the forefront of peace negotiations in Congo. I think there's something very, very powerful in knowing that you are going to be accountable to women at the end of a conflict. So far that has almost never been the case.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cotler.

We'll turn now to Mr. Schellenberger, please.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you very much for being here.

Peace is essential for a stable country. We all know that. After a couple of decades of fighting in the Congo, if you're in rebel groups and you're not getting paid, you only get what you pilfer. I can understand that.

Is any of the sexual violence against women motivated by religion?

● (1350)

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: That's such an interesting question. I would have to say that, while there are often very elaborate kinds of magical belief systems within subgroups, almost kind of a mythology that is created as being a part of armed group, in terms of traditional religion that's not something I'm aware of happening.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Before the conflict started, they didn't have these rapes and sexual violence against women, but since the violence has started, this sexual violence against women has grown. It seems to me as if it's almost a fight against women. When that is happening, they get discharged from their village or divorced by their family. Have there been recent changes? Has it gotten more prevalent recently or over the years?

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: Yes, this is such a powerful observation. I think you're exactly right. One other thing I think I've heard other experts on Congo say is that many armed groups try very hard not to fight each other, and instead, in a very cowardly way, end up exerting force on civilian populations almost as their way of showing how strong they are.

So it is often truly a war fought on the battleground of women's bodies, and more broadly on civilian communities, rather than through direct combat between armed groups. I think this is one of the saddest and most shocking things about the conflict in DRC.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: It's a very cowardly way, I would say.

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: Absolutely, and I think another point you made, which is really important, is that we certainly see forms of violence against women that we never saw before the conflict, including public rape, or forced incest, or rape of the very young or the very old. However, I do think it's important to recognize that sexual violence is a continuum. It occurs in peacetime, and it will continue to occur when the conflict ends, and this is something that we have to keep in mind. Drawing a distinction between conflict-related sexual violence and non-conflict sexual violence is sometimes important, but in order to truly address the issue of violence against women, we actually have to look at this as a continuum, as opposed to a dichotomous issue.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: That was my question.

The Chair: That's it? All right.

This gives me a chance then to pop in and just ask for a little additional clarification.

You mentioned that the groups in some cases avoid combat with each other and exploit the population, which raises two alternative possibilities in my mind. Perhaps they're both correct, but it would seem to me that either one or the other is.

Possibility number one is that these groups are operating a bit like the *condottieri* of the Italian Renaissance, groups that could have fought each other but were actually trying to avoid inciting any casualties and would engage in demonstrations of strength in some other manner. That's one possibility.

The other possibility is that these are simply groups of brigands, to some degree. They started evolving into groups that really didn't have a cause except self-perpetuation.

What would be the case?

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: I think both explanations are valid, and I really think the second explanation rings true. I think after two decades of instability, those mechanisms that are successful, that actually work, are often mechanisms of "take what you can, and take what you can by force while you can". I think it's tragic, but many of the more traditional economic systems have begun to disintegrate as a result of this sustained insecurity, and what has emerged is an adapted system of economic opportunism that involves starting a rebel group.

One of the sadder things I saw on a recent trip to DRC occurred when I was with my Congolese mentor, Justin Kabanga, who is head of this psychosocial assistance organization. We were in a car together on a remote rural road, and two seven-year-old boys had pulled a string across the road, and we slowed down because they had created a very small roadblock. We rolled down the window and one boy asked for money, and I was horrified because this was seeing a young generation of Congolese boys mimicking what they saw as what men did.

It really created an interesting conversation with Justin about what kinds of jobs.... Some children play store, and these boys were actually playing rebel group. I think what people often do is that they see the most viable way to make money is to create these semi-politically motivated, but mostly just opportunistic, armed groups.

● (1355)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Toone, you are batting cleanup today.

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Reid. I'm glad to be taking up the rear.

And thanks for all of your presentations. It has been very illuminating, and I apologize for the cavernous nature of the room.

I was wondering if you could discuss HIV a little bit. Certainly, armed conflict is a significant vector and sexual violence is the vehicle. We know that Congo has a fairly high rate of HIV occurrence. I think it's somewhere around 5%, and the majority of those are women and girls. So I would imagine it has had quite an impact. I know the government is very conscious of the problem and has been trying to work through it.

Can you maybe discuss a little bit the impact that has had on communities? What kinds of measures have we taken to try to stop the transmission, and to at least treat those who have it? And what can we do from here to help them?

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: One of the most important things is recognizing it as a problem, so it's encouraging to hear you bring up the issue, which is very important.

It also begs the broader question of how to provide effective health and medical services in DRC, which is in dire need, and possibly providing HIV care as part of more integrated health services.

I know that many NGOs do remarkable work providing health services in collaboration with the national government.

HIV is especially interesting because I think there is actually broad recognition of the threat of the disease. It can often create a rather perverse situation where people assume that survivors of sexual violence have AIDS—all of them—and that it's guaranteed and inevitable.

This definitely feeds into the stigmatization and ostracism of women who have been raped, which is unfortunate since, on one hand, you want a recognition of HIV as a problem, but you also want people to recognize that it's not an inevitable outcome of rape. So there is a need to temper recognition by providing services, but also realizing that we need to reduce the stigma of the fact that women and girls are susceptible to this.

It's encouraging that the Congolese government is aware of the issue and I think that there needs to be a bit more attention on the ground to voluntary counselling, testing, and prevention of mother-to-child transmission, and provision of antiretroviral therapy.

These are all important efforts that could actually be strengthened.

Mr. Philip Toone: I really like the idea of mental disarmament that you mentioned earlier, and think that it's probably the key in the long term.

When it comes to girls especially, there are probably some challenges with being able to get them the services they need to mentally disarm, because there have been girl child soldiers as well as boys.

How is that going? Maybe we could also bring it back. I'm going to assume that some of these girls are probably victims of sexual violence as well. Could you discuss a little bit the impact on girls and how we're helping them reintegrate?

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: Yes, absolutely. I would say that the vast majority, if not all, of the girls who have been associated with armed groups are probably the victims of sexual violence or sexual slavery.

We've interviewed a great number of female former child soldiers who note that the best possible outcome they could hope for was to belong to a commander who would then protect them from other sexual predation.

One of the challenges for women and girls leaving armed groups is that they face much more stigma than men. They're often looked upon as being used goods. They don't even have the dubious honour of having tried to protect their country. They're not seen as real soldiers, but often as just sexual playthings who are now tainted by their time associated with armed groups, even though some of the women and girls actually self-identified as having tried to become soldiers for a greater good.

They don't really have any sense of belonging in a community. Many people think they should go back to armed groups, or they don't have a place. They're not eligible for marriage and they're not seen as fulfilling any kind of traditional female role.

One thing women face as well is that they often have children as a result of their time in armed groups and these children often face, as their mothers do, very intense stigma. There is this assumption that the children will grow up to be bad like their fathers, or are already soldiers in some way, shape, or form and cannot be trusted, should not be educated, and should not be allowed to stay in relatives' houses, etc.

So addressing the stigma against not only former female soldiers and survivors of sexual violence, but their children as well is extraordinarily important.

That gets us back to these generational impacts of violence. Right now we see a generation of children who have been affected by or directly borne from sexual violence. If we don't take this up as an issue that is worthy of examination and address it now, I think it will clearly come to the fore in another generation.

● (1400)

Mr. Philip Toone: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Toone.

Well, thank you very much to our witness today for coming here and enlightening us. This will make it possible to have a more fulsome report than would otherwise have been possible, so I very much appreciate that, as we all do.

Colleagues, after we dismiss the witness, I have to ask you to stay here for a brief in camera session. If you would indulge us, we'll just suspend for a moment while we move to an in camera session.

Thank you very much.

Mrs. Jocelyn Kelly: It was an honour to be here.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're suspended.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*