Voices of Combatants

Interviews with Mai Mai Soldiers in Eastern DRC

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DRC Context
Context

- Beginning in 1993, Mai Mai militias organized to protect their communities from the influx of foreign militias after the 1994 Rwandan genocide;
- Implicated in the looting, rape, abduction, and mass displacement of civilians;
- Current efforts to integrate Mai Mai into the national army.
Project Background
Methods

- 74 combatants were interviewed in three rural towns in eastern DRC (Kamituga, Katogota, Chambucha) – this is sub-analysis of 31 interviews;
- Represented two sub-groups Shikito and Kifuafua;
- Research conducted from January 2009 to February 2010;
- Interviewers were Congolese men trained as social workers and psychologists;
- Presence of foreign researcher
Challenges

• Creating rapport with interviewee/gaining trust

• Avoiding “coached” responses and “shut down”
  - Interviewer: “According to you, what could be the motivation for men to commit rape?”
  - Interviewee: “I don’t know and I don’t have any answer about it.”

• Not able to get perspectives from other armed groups due to political climate/security
Results
Initiation and Mindset

• New recruits undergo involved and sometimes violent initiation rites upon joining the Mai Mai;
• Removal from home village and social norms;
• Sense of anonymity and impunity that continues throughout soldiers’ service.
Civilian Relationships

• Soldiers have a contradictory relationship with civilians:
  – Desire to reintegrate into civilian life and return to pre-war norms
  – Civilians seen as exploitable resource (money, food, other needs) – “fields to be harvested”
Perception of Women

• Rigid gender norms contribute to the view of female civilians as exploitable;
• Traditional conceptions of women as possessions and the helpers of men;
• Dismissive attitudes towards female combatants.
Sexual Violence

• Sexual violence by other armed groups, particularly foreign groups, is seen as a motivation to fight (existential threat to Congolese);

• Soldiers see themselves as “protectors” of population and may rely on civilians for support.
Sexual Violence

• Soldiers justify sexual violence perpetrated by members of their own group;
• Sexual violence is driven both by military and personal motives;
• Soldiers make distinctions between different kinds of rape, and of acceptability of different types of violence.
Fear of Infection

- High awareness of HIV/AIDS and risks associated with rape;
- Messaging received over radio;
- Some soldiers cited this as strong disincentive to rape.
Demobilization

• High amount of interest in demobilization or integration into national army;
• However, few sustainable job solutions for demobilized soldiers and little or no steady pay in army;
• As a result, soldiers may re-join militias because lack of viable alternatives.
Implications and Recommendations
Implications

• Mai Mai have fractured and sometimes contradictory attitudes towards sexual violence

• Demobilization does not currently provide adequate support to ex combatants.
Implications

- Each armed group, and even sub-groups, may have their own profile and motivations;
- Messages more effective when tailored to the particular motivations of an armed group;
- Militia attitudes will manifest in the national army, unless active steps are taken to change them.
Recommendations

• Use DDR as an opportunity;
• Improve civil-military cooperation;
• Provide viable employment alternatives;
• Improve messaging about the risks of sexual violence;
• Prosecute rape crimes, from the highest level of command to the lowest, to send a clear message this type of violence will not be tolerated.