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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Grotesque Vocabulary in Congo

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BUKAVU, Congo

I've learned some new words.

One is "autocannibalism," coined in French but equally appropriate in English. It describes what happens when a militia here in eastern Congo's endless war cuts flesh from living victims and forces them to eat it.

Another is "re-rape." The need for that term arose because doctors were seeing women and girls raped, re-raped and re-raped again, here in the world capital of murder, rape, mutilation.

This grotesque vocabulary helps answer a question that I've had from readers: Why Congo? After a previous visit to eastern Congo, a reader named Jim D. objected. "Yes there are horrible things happening in Africa," he wrote on my blog. "None are anything we can do anything about by ourselves."

"My question is why do you not concentrate on this nation's poor," he asked. "Yes, Africa suffers, but you need to look in your own house first."

Jim D. has a legitimate complaint, echoed by other readers: We have enormous needs at home, and we shouldn't let foreign crises distract us from them.

But do we really need to say that we can't address suffering in Congo or Haiti, or anywhere else, because we have our own needs? Particularly when the Congo war has claimed so many lives (perhaps more than six million), isn't it time for the U.S. to lead a major, global diplomatic push for peace?

Sometimes it's said that women and children bear the brunt of the brutality in Congo. That's not quite right; a United Nations official estimates that the population here in South Kivu Province is 55 percent female because so many men have been executed. Women are less likely to be killed but more likely to be tortured.

So can anything be done about this abattoir, or is Jim D. right that it is just one more tragedy to which we must wearily resign ourselves?

One answer is simple: Some people are already showing that it is possible to make a difference here. [International Rescue Committee](#) is helping rape survivors recover. The [World Food Program](#) averts starvation with its food distributions. And Eve Ensler, author of "The Vagina Monologues," is working with Unicef to build [a City of Joy here](#) to train women — some of them shattered by war — to transform their communities. City of Joy will teach legal rights, self-defense and skills for economic empowerment, and a team of female construction workers is helping build it right now.

“The intention is to transform pain into power,” explained Christine Schuler Deschryver, who manages the project in Congo.

As for whether it is possible to end the war itself, it helps to understand why Congolese civilians are subjected to autocannibalism and re-rape. It’s not just mindless savagery. Rather, after talking to survivors and perpetrators alike over the years, I’ve come to believe that the atrocities are calculated and strategic, serving two main purposes.

First, they terrorize populations and shatter traditional structures of authority.

Second, they create cohesiveness among the misfit, often youthful soldiers typically employed by warlords. If commanders can get their troops to commit unspeakable atrocities, those soldiers are less likely ever to return to society.

So don’t think of wartime atrocities as some ineluctable Lord of the Flies reversion to life in a natural state but as a calculated military strategy. We can change those calculations by holding commanders accountable.

A four-step approach would be:

- Pressure on Rwanda to stop funding its pet Tutsi militia in Congo. Rwanda also should publish a list of those facing criminal charges for its 1994 genocide so that more Hutu militiamen not on the list might go back. A [Rwandan war shouldn’t be fought](#) in Congo.
- An international regime to monitor mineral exports from Congo so that warlords do not monetize their militias by exporting minerals through Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi. Legislation to do this, backed by [an advocacy group](#) called the Enough Project, is pending in Congress.
- A major push to demobilize Rwandan Hutu fighters and return as many as possible to civilian life in Rwanda or settlements in Congo or Burundi. That should be coupled with a crackdown on leaders in Congo and those who direct action from Europe and the United States.
- A drive to professionalize the Congolese Army and end the impunity for murder, torture and rape, starting with the arrest of [Jean Bosco Ntaganda](#) on his warrant for war crimes.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit to eastern Congo last year was a landmark, but it needs more follow-up from the Obama administration. What is required isn’t some new formula but much greater political will. Otherwise, the fighting will go on for years to come — and this lovely, lush land will spawn even more horrific vocabulary.

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