



## **Mathilde Muhindo**

11 November 2009

*Mathilde Muhindo is in the UK to receive the Human Rights Watch prize for extraordinary activism which she will receive at a dinner being hosted at the Natural History Museum. The award is in recognition of her work on sexual and gender based violence in eastern DRC. Sexual violence remains endemic in eastern Congo and is accompanied by wide spread impunity. The situation has worsened of late as a result of current military operations being undertaken against the Rwandan rebel group, the FDLR. Mathilde was a member of the transitional parliament of the DRC until 2006 and was an influential player in putting into place the law which made rape illegal in the DRC.. The meeting was simultaneously translated between English and French.*

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Congo is at the heart of Africa and could be a focal point for future stability. The elections which took place in 2006 were the first important step towards democracy in the DRC; we must build on this foundation. The current military operations – called Kimya II - against the FDLR are destroying civil society as well as many of the advances which have been made outside the formal political framework. While the UN, mandated to protect civilians, are providing logistical support to the Congolese army in these operations, many ordinary people now feel unsure as to who is actually protecting them and who they can turn to for protection against rebel attacks. By providing logistical support, MONUC are implicated in the human rights abuses against civilians - the numbers of rapes and murders and other abuses have increased while the Kimya II operation has been ongoing. It is important that we can engage in a dialogue with the armed groups in eastern Congo. This dialogue should not only be in the DRC itself, but also needs to take a regional dimension.

The UN has developed a Comprehensive Strategy on combating sexual violence in eastern Congo, but little seems to have come from it. There was supposed to be a senior person arriving in the DRC to lead the strategy's implementation but this person has yet to arrive. Apparently someone has been recruited, but as of two weeks ago they had not yet arrived in country.

It is often difficult for human rights defenders to do their work effectively in the DRC. Anyone who is critical is likely to become a target. Mathilde has had a military commander come directly to her house to target her, but she was able to escape. Bukavu seems to be a particularly dangerous place to be a human rights defender. The cases of Serge Maheshe, Pascal Ngundo and Kalumbulu are often cited; more recently other radio journalists have been killed or have received death threats. A human rights lawyer was also killed earlier this year. The situation seems to have worsened on the back of the ousting of the previous Speaker, Vital Kamerhe, in Kinshasa earlier this year. There is a sense that anyone who speaks out against the current government questions is targeted or intimidated. Human Rights Watch have also become targets for criticism since they vocally spoke out against Kimia II.

UN Security Council discussions are beginning to focus on the abuses by the current military operations. The French, Belgian, Dutch and US governments have all made statements condemning the operations. The EU is currently not speaking with a comprehensive voice. Human Rights Watch have also seen UN legal advice on this issue which was not fully supportive of the operations; in addition, the Protection Cluster (a group of UN agencies) have been critical of the most recent report to the Security Council.

Other points of discussion related to the renewal of MONUC's mandate – discussions are due to begin imminently. There are currently some shortfalls in MONUC's operations and rules of engagement, for example there has yet to be a conclusive definition of what is meant by "protection". This should be addressed when the mandate is renewed along with a plan for implementation. The prospects for upcoming elections were also discussed. The population are not that excited by the prospects of elections – they have seen little development since the previous elections and do not see what they are voting for. However, as Kabila was elected in 2006 on a platform of bringing peace to Congo and has not delivered, he has become considerably less popular in the east (his previous support base). While it is important that the national elections take place in 2011, local elections are likely to fuel conflict and ethnic rivalries in the east – even if locals are elected, they will have few resources and little influence.