

Quilters Unite Across Continents to Denounce Sexual Violence in the Congo



Mboko, DRC, and Washington DC: One embroidered panel depicts a woman lying broken on the ground. Another shows a soldier killing a child. A third shows child soldiers being abducted. Another depicts a village in flames.

Their message is terrifying, but the needlework is exquisite. Such are the conflicting impressions left by the [Ahadi Quilt](#) - a set of six quilts that have been made by survivors of sexual violence in the Congo to bring their story to the world. The survivors made 120 panels last year while recovering from rape at a center run by [SOS Femmes en Danger \(SOSFED\)](#) in Fizi Territory, South Kivu (left). The panels were brought to the US by The Advocacy Project (AP) and assembled into quilts by volunteers in Maryland and Michigan. They are being exhibited

in Europe and North America.

Meanwhile, sexual violence is again on the rise in the Eastern Congo. Over 200 rapes were recorded in Fizi between January and March of this year, compared to 37 in the same period last year. Most took the form of mass rapes, and were carried out by Hutu rebels from Rwanda, who appear to be using terror to control food and minerals. But many of the SOSFED survivors were attacked by soldiers from a battalion of the Congolese Army known as Amani Leo ("Peace Now"). AP's field officer in South Kivu, Walter James, describes two mass rapes by government troops, in [Kikoze](#) and [Fizi Town](#), in his blogs.

In turning to quilting, the Congolese survivors have followed the example of other AP partners, including massacre survivors from Bosnia and Guatemala, people with disability in northern Uganda, and children in Nepal.

In each case, the artists have used quilting not just to express their pain but also build support for their advocacy. As a result, their message is often bleak. The Congolese women have called their quilt Ahadi, which means "promise" in Swahili. But one survivor, Maua Masui, depicted an AK-47 to "show people what makes orphans in the Congo." Another, Mlasi Mitumba, reports that she was rejected by her community after being raped.

All of the artists asked that their photos be used, and SOSFED staff see this as an essential part of their protest. "These are images that speak," said Mariamu Bashishibe, who manages the SOSFED center in Mboko. "Rape survivors have few other ways to express themselves." But Ms Bashishibe also said that the project is teaching women how to design and sew, which can be useful skills. Indeed, the Ahadi quilt has created such a demand for sewing that AP is seeking \$600 to buy sewing machines for the two SOSFED centers.

The quilt project was managed by Amisi Awi, from SOSFED, with support from two AP peace fellows - Ned Meerdink and Sylvie Bisangwa, a Rwandan-American graduate from Wisconsin University. Together they scoured shops in Burundi and Rwanda for high-quality thread. Nombi Baruani, a local artist, then met with each woman and sketched out a design on cloth.

Ms Bisangwa brought the finished panels to the US, where they were assembled by volunteers from the Capitol City Quilt Guild in Michigan and the Faithful Circle Quilting Guild in Maryland. Several Maryland quilters talk movingly about the experience in a video: "You feel the anger and the despair and frustration," said Susan Schreurs, a veteran quilter. "It's just very powerful to work with these pictures, smoothing them out and making them ready for a quilt."

In displaying the quilts, AP also seeks to promote SOSFED's strategy of risk reduction. Most of the women at the Mboko Center were alone when they were attacked. As a result, SOSFED is renting fields where women can cultivate in a group, and experimenting with alternative cooking fuel which will lessen the need to go into the forests in search of charcoal.

The first quilt was shown at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in February, as part of a larger exhibition of quilts on women and war. The event was sponsored by the Geneva Office of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and introduced by Ambassadors from the US and Canada. The US Mission put out a video later which featured the Ahadi quilt and helped spread the message.

In March, a second Ahadi quilt was featured in Berlin at the tenth anniversary of Zivik, the German program which funds SOSFED in the Congo. The anniversary was attended by officials from the German Foreign Ministry and featured an address by Marceline Kongolo, the director of SOSFED and AP Director Iain Guest.

More recently, students exhibited all six Ahadi quilts at Georgetown University (right). The event was introduced by Ambassador William Garvelink, who served as US ambassador in Kinshasa between 2007 and 2010, and co-sponsored by The Washington Office of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). AP hopes to exhibit the quilts on the US Capitol and at the UN in New York.

Looking ahead, quilting continues to attract new advocates. Several AP partners will be making advocacy quilts this summer, with support from Peace Fellows. They include Roma women in Kosovo and the Czech Republic, and



The Ahadi Quilts on Display at Georgetown University, Washington

former child laborers in Nepal.

- To donate to sewing machines send donation marked SOSFED
- Contact us to show the quilt at an event
- See [photos and profiles of the quilts](#) and quilters
- See the quilt at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva
- See the quilts being assembled in Maryland
- See the quilts being exhibited at Georgetown University
- Read Walter's blogs about the politics of rape and background to recent mass rapes.