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Village Chiefs Join the Campaign against War Rape in the Eastern Congo

Iain Guest from The Advocacy Project (AP) reports on the work of [SOS Femmes en Danger](#), an AP partner that supports survivors of armed sexual violence in South Kivu.

Sitting under a mango tree recently in Bakeche, a picturesque village in eastern Congo, I watched local leaders discuss the momentous change that had come to their community after a militia member was arrested for raping a young woman.

The hero of the hour was the chief of Bakeche, Badanwa Atako (photo). In May, Mr Atako attended training given by SOS Femmes en Danger (SOSFED) and by Congolese lawyers working for the [American Bar Association](#). Funding for the training came from the [National Endowment for Democracy](#) in Washington and the [Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations/Zivik](#) in Germany.

Inspired by the training, Mr Atako contacted the police as soon as he heard of the rape. Other village chiefs who attended the training also spread the word in their villages. As a result, 10 rape victims have come forward and denounced their attackers, most of whom are in jail.



Man of the moment: Chief Atako, pictured with Mariamu Bashishibe from SOSFED

Village chiefs have not been systematically co-opted into the fight against rape, but that may now be changing - and it is here, in villages like Bakeche, that the impact will be most felt. Bakeche is a sprawling coastal community of 32,000 that borders Lake Tanganyika and lies in Fizi Territory, the southernmost district of South Kivu province.

For much of the past decade this coastal strip has been hellish for women, but current trends are more encouraging and the number of rape victims seeking refuge at the nearby SOSFED center of Mboko has fallen by half from 2010. Many villages along this part of the coast have not reported a rape for two to three years.

One reason is improved discipline in the Congolese Army, which has been responsible for much of the past violence. Another reason is that women are taking precautions. Using funds from Zivik in Germany and from the Foreign Ministry of Liechtenstein, SOSFED has [installed a well at the Mboko center](#) which relieves women of the need to travel long distances and risk their lives searching for water (photo).

The program also rents land where survivors can [cultivate together in relative safety](#) and offers them \$20 if they continue to cultivate in a group when they return home. These efforts at risk reduction, combined with repeated spots on radio, have almost certainly contributed to the decline in sexual violence in the area.

Chiefs like Mr Atako have played an important role in this campaign by putting pressure on husbands to take back their wives after a rape. But it is only this year that chiefs have been drawn into the fight for justice. SOSFED's goal is ambitious: to turn these uneducated men into advocates for women's rights.

Should the attempt even be made? The question is reasonable, because these chiefs preside over a patriarchal society which places many burdens on women. But Mwamis also have families and I have met several whose own wives and daughters have been attacked. They understand the threat from rape, but they also need a practical agenda. They need to know that the law will back them up if they challenge militia. Their efforts need to be appreciated.



Lifesaver: the water well at Mboko helps women avoid rape. The well has not broken down in three years.

Most important, women need to find their voice and denounce their attackers. In 2010 this would have been unthinkable. But today, five civil society organizations accompany women to the courts in this area, with support from their donors and the [UN's human rights team](#). Law has gained a toe-hold in this lawless society.

Unfortunately, the strategy is beginning to coalesce at a time when security is again deteriorating. Government forces control the main road, but anarchy reigns on either side of it. According to the UN, ten armed militia armies are operating in Fizi Territory alone. One warlord, Bwasakala, controls the foothills above Bakeche. Amuri Yakatumba, another ruthless

leader whose troops have pillaged two SOSFED centers and kidnapped SOSFED staff, holds sway further south. Hutu from Rwanda who participated in the 1994 genocide, and rebels from Burundi, are also well-entrenched in the area.

These hard men will not be easily subdued. The UN mission MONUSCO has the means, but missed a golden opportunity to capitalize on the defeat of the M 23 rebels in North Kivu last year. Expecting the worst, even the Rwandan Hutu offered to lay down arms. But the UN push failed to materialize and the fighters regrouped, stronger than ever. Adding to the uncertainty, UN agencies predict a sharp fall in aid to the Congo this year.



Present and correct? Discipline in the Congolese Army appears to be improving, and helping to reduce attacks on women

For the foreseeable future, the campaign against rape will have to proceed against this chaotic backdrop. Still, villages like Bakeche show that it can happen. Women here now have a leader and a legal system to turn to in the event of a crisis. This represents a profound change, and I suspect that the genie will not easily be put back in the bottle - no matter how much more violence these women have to endure.

This sends a powerful message at a time when protecting civilians in war has never been more difficult. It is also a strong reason not to give up on the Congo.

- * Read about [SOSFED's campaign to prevent war rape](#)
- * Watch AP's [video tribute to women of Congo](#)
- * Learn about water and risk reduction [from this video](#)
- * View the [Ahadi quilts](#), made by survivors in the DRC and assembled in the US.

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