

19 January 2008

Dear friends,

Africa

The developments in **Kenya** have taken us by surprise. Kenya is so strategic for the stability and economic health of the subregion, Mombasa being a major port (e.g. in Rwanda we have been queuing for a ration of \$10 of petrol). Electoral observers have declared that vote counting was flawed and the results rigged. The Orange Democratic Movement managed to win the majority of seats in parliament - 102 seats compared to the President's party of 36 seats, yet the Electoral Commission inexplicably announced President Kibaki the winner. Kenyan police battle hundreds of protesters across the country, as the opposition continues to protest, defying a ban on rallies. The killings, beatings and burnings continue to bring loss, suffering and fear, especially to women and children, with an upsurge in the rape of women and girls. Over 600 people have been killed and nearly one million displaced. The elections saw 15 women elected to parliament, a record for the country whose previous parliament had only nine elected female members, and nine nominated members out of a total of 222, but Kenya continues to lag behind its neighbours in eastern and central Africa in relation to women politicians.

To the west of Rwanda, conflict also is rife. The days of chaos in the **Democratic Republic of Congo** were supposed to be over. Last year, this country of 66 million people held a historic election that cost \$US500 million and was intended to end Congo's various wars and rebellions and its tradition of epically bad government. But the elections have not unified the country nor significantly strengthened the Congolese government's hand to deal with renegade forces, many of them from outside the country. The justice system and the military still barely function, and United Nations officials say Congolese government troops are among the worst offenders when it comes to rape. Large swathes of the country, especially in the east, remain authority-free zones where civilians are at the mercy of heavily-armed groups who have made warfare a livelihood and survive by raiding villages and abducting women for ransom. According to rape victims, one of the newest groups to emerge is called the Rastas, a mysterious gang of dreadlocked fugitives who live deep in the forest, wear shiny tracksuits and Los Angeles Lakers jerseys, and are notorious for burning babies, kidnapping women and literally chopping up anybody who gets in their way. UN officials say the so-called Rastas were once part of the Hutu militias who fled Rwanda after committing genocide there in 1994, and are attempting to gather strength in eastern DRC to launch attacks on Rwanda. More than 200,000 people have been displaced by fighting.

In the troubled **Sudanese region of Darfur** to our north, the joint African Union-UN operation is supposed to consist of up to 19,555 military personnel, 3,772 police officers and 5,105 civilians (UN Security Council resolution) making it one of the largest peacekeeping operations in the world. The beleaguered and under-resourced force is currently comprised of around 7,000 troops and 1,200 police, almost entirely African Union personnel who were already on the ground. Like many governments, UN officials, and others following the Darfur crisis, the Coalition places most of the blame for UNAMID's initial shortcomings on Sudan's government, accusing Khartoum of imposing conditions that would render the mission likely to fail.

So while **Rwanda** now enjoys peace and stability, it is situated in a conflict-ridden region. This ongoing and sporadic violence in neighboring countries continues to threaten Rwanda's borders, and communities, particularly women. In an unprecedented partnership with UNIFEM to end gender-based violence (GBV), the Rwanda Defense Force (RDF) has launched a program to engage its officers in addressing the nature, causes and impact of gendered violence in the country, and identify effective strategies to combat it. GBV is considered a security threat that breeds a negative impact on socio-economic development in general, and human rights in particular. Attempts are being made to strengthen efforts to integrate the reduction of GBV into conflict prevention programs and strategies. The types of GBV perpetrated against women in times of conflict reflect the norms tolerated during peace time, but are aggravated by the climate of hostility, stress, lawlessness, impunity, and the proliferation of arms and armed personnel. Rwanda Police already operate a GBV desk at

their national headquarters to prevent and rapidly respond to GBV cases. A GBV Desk will soon be set up within the military, and training manuals developed for the RDF as part of enhanced coordination on prevention and response to GBV.

Other evidence of progress in Rwanda is the closing down of *Medecins Sans Frontieres'* (MSF) activities after 16 years. Its last remaining program, providing medical care for people with HIV/AIDS in Kigali, has been officially handed over to the health authorities. MSF teams initially provided an emergency medical response to people suffering from the hardships of war, and in recent years re-focused their activities on vulnerable groups during the reconstruction period.

I am a member of the Africa International Club in Rwanda, an association for diplomatic and other foreign women who raise funds for worthy causes through social activity, including book clubs (the latest at my home last Thursday evening) and visits to interesting projects. This month we spent time at an environmental engineering project, which repairs and reconstructs the ravines resulting from natural erosion in residential areas in Kigali. Originally the ravines ran about 4.5 km in length and were as much as 15 m deep. Due to their location between houses, they are a continuing hazard for the local residents, with houses falling into the ravines during very heavy rains and about one accidental death a week. The European Union is financing a scheme to make the ravines safer. This project contributes to the economic integration of widows and demilitarised soldiers (The Government has demobilized 60,000 combatants including 624 child soldiers in its militia demobilization program). The ravines are being filled so that a 1.5 - 2 m deep canal remains in place. The work has already provided jobs for 5,000 people on six month rotations. Each time the project recruits, there are about 6 - 8,000 candidates for the 300 available positions. Women make up 60 percent of the labourers. Although weaker than the men women work harder, so that by the end of the day their production is at least as good. The project pays a decent salary of which one-third is held in a savings account for the duration of the work and two-thirds is paid into a current account. At the end of the 6-month rotation, the employees thus have a small capital sum set aside to start income-generating projects. Women have not been involved in construction work before - and are now employable by many companies.

Rwandan is one of the African countries that are banding together to improve air safety across the continent, grappling with dangerous airplanes and lax aviation rules. Passengers flying in Africa are roughly 75 times more likely to die in a crash than fliers in North America. World aviation specialists are endorsing a cooperative approach to meet world standards and provide funding, training and model texts of aviation regulations that meet global standards

Pakistan

The assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December was a great tragedy for Pakistan. One journalist wrote "Bhutto was a conscious leader -- she observed herself, understood her actions and how they would be perceived both by her country and the world. She knew the reality of being a member of a martyred family, of being a mother, of being a leader in a challenging and unstable land...Benazir knew what it meant to be a woman leader in an Islamic state. She was beloved by many and forcefully hated by others; some because of her politics and some because of her gender. Bhutto once said: "For me the need was never for power, it was always the dream of Pakistan as an Islamic social democracy, better social justice, it was the dream that Pakistan would not be a dictatorship...that it could be a role model for other Muslim countries that were seeking change through peaceful means rather than violent means". In February 2007, Zil-e-Huma Usman, a female provincial Cabinet Minister from Pakistan's Punjab region was also assassinated, because "women should not hold important positions". In May, the country's tourism Minister Nilofar Bakhtiar was forced to resign after hardline Islamist clerics branded her 'obscene' for hugging a man after a charity parachute jump. Meanwhile, a female politician in Afghanistan, Malalai Joya was suspended in what she described as a political conspiracy, after she said that Afghanistan's parliament was "worse than a stable". In Basra, Iraq's second largest city, some 133 women were killed last year, either by religious vigilantes or as a result of so-called 'honor' killings; 79 deemed by extremists to be 'violating Islamic teachings', 47 'honor' killings and seven for their political affiliations.

Bangladesh

The role of moderate Muslim women leaders in predominantly Muslim countries has been critical in Bangladesh: in the restoration of democracy, the education for boys and girls, but primarily of girls, has made a huge impact. The steps taken by the democratic women leaders have led to fewer dropouts among female students, and a higher percentage entering higher education and university. It has also made it possible for women to enter the employment market, competing with men. Women workers are the majority in the Bangladesh ready-made garments sector and fish processing, another viable Bangladesh foreign exchange earner. As a further result, the age of marriage for young women has risen, and dowry-related crime and acid violence have been stalled. Bangladesh has seen the lowest population growth rate in South Asia, and health care and sanitation reaching the most remote areas. Although the two women leaders have been charged with corruption by the current military government, they have been imprisoned before being proven guilty. A controversial Bangladeshi Muslim woman writer Taslima Nasreen heavily criticized by radical Islamists critics has been forced to leave Kolkata after five years protection and is now being sheltered in India. On 9 January she was awarded the prestigious Simon de Beauvoir feminist award in recognition of her writing on rights for women. It was Beauvoir's 100th birth anniversary

Blessings of peace and hope to you all.

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