



**Statement by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on  
Sexual Violence in Conflict Margot Wallström  
on recent AJPH study  
(New York, 11 May 2011)**

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I welcome the new study on sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) published today in the American Journal of Public Health (AJPH). It is a commendable effort that helps to fill the gap in empirical research in this area, because we cannot prevent what we do not adequately understand.

While my Office works to address the issue of sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict contexts, where rape is often an instrument of war and/or commanded by military actors, the AJPH study covers ‘sexual violence’ including domestic and intimate partner violence. This inevitably makes the AJPH figures higher.

Official UN figures tend to be conservative, because the United Nations can only report to the Security Council information on sexual violence that has been verified by the organisation itself. The UN cannot extrapolate from a small sample the incidence of sexual violence throughout the DRC. Additionally, the UN has ethical obligations that are not generally incumbent upon academic researchers, namely to avoid interviewing survivors or exposing them to any risk of reprisal/re-traumatization in the absence of the ability to deliver services or follow-up on the case. The UN has a responsibility to survivors in this regard that is different from a purely academic orientation.

My Office has found that definitional ambiguity is one of a number of factors that explains the difference between various findings. Different definitions – some expansive, others narrow – make data difficult to interpret and compare. But studies like this are important, and valuable in shedding light on risk factors, such as age, or region of residence, which moves the analysis beyond isolated incident reports to convey a sense of patterns.

When I report numbers, I always include the proviso that most cases of sexual violence go under-reported, due to shame, stigma, fear of reprisals and lack of help and/or legal follow-up. Therefore, as I consistently underline, the number of reported violations are just the tip of the iceberg of actual incidents.

Conflict-related sexual violence is one of the major obstacles to peace in the DRC. Unchecked, it could disrupt the entire social fabric in the country. Since I took office last year, I have emphasised that the UN can do no less than bring all of its accountability tools to bear. Although a lot of work remains to be done, achievements include the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1960 last December, which gives us the instruments needed to ensure that mass rape is never again met with mass impunity.

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For additional information, please contact:

Mattias Sundholm, Office of the SRSG on Sexual Violence in Conflict,

at +1 917 628 3531 or [sundholm@un.org](mailto:sundholm@un.org).