

The Guardian: Mary Robinson, UN Special Envoy to Great Lakes Region: DRC's Women Hold Key to Lasting Peace

The Guardian 12 August 2013 Not a week goes by without reports of fresh fighting in the eastern areas of the

[Democratic Republic of the Congo](#)

(DRC). Violence and destruction have ravaged the Great Lakes region of

[Africa](#)

for two decades, claiming more than 5 million lives. Yet the situation rarely makes the headlines.

What strikes me is the lack of outrage and horror, particularly given the disproportionate impact the conflict is having on women and children. As I asked the UN security council last month, how can we accept a situation where rape and sexual violence – which, let us be clear, are [war crimes](#)

– have become the norm?

When

[Ban Ki-moon asked me to become his special envoy for the Great Lakes](#)

in March, I felt a particular responsibility to the mothers, daughters and grandmothers who – since my first visit to the region, as president of Ireland in 1994 – have shared with me what they have suffered in Bujumbura, Bukavu, Goma, Kigali or Kinshasa.

In 20 years of killings, rape, destruction and displacement, these women have suffered most. Yet I believe they are the region's best hope for building lasting peace. My job now, and the job of the international community, is to support them in every way we can.

Women's voices should not only be heard because they are the victims of the war. Their active participation in peace efforts is essential, because they are the most effective peace builders. As men take up arms, women hold communities together in times of war. This makes them stronger and better equipped

[to play a key role in securing real peace](#)

, as we have seen in Northern Ireland, Liberia and elsewhere.

My approach to peace-building involves not just political leaders, but all of civil society, including women. Without their full support and participation, no peace agreement can succeed. How many secret deals have been negotiated in the Great Lakes region, only to be ignored or forgotten by the signatories for lack of transparency and accountability?

I believe the

[peace, security and co-operation framework for the DRC and the region](#)

, signed in Addis Ababa in February 2013 by 11 African countries, provides an opportunity to do

things differently. That is why I have called it a framework of hope. I have started to work on its implementation top-down, with the 11 heads of state who signed the agreement, and bottom-up, with the people of the region who will be its real beneficiaries.

As [the first woman to be appointed UN special envoy](#), I have promised to ensure that women's voices are heard at the negotiating table. Last month, with [Femmes Africa Solidarité](#) and the [International Conference on the Great Lakes Region](#), we [brought together more than 100 women](#) from across the region – including the gender ministers of the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi – in Bujumbura. One upshot of the meeting has been to ensure the consequences of sexual violence are included in the benchmarks we are developing to measure progress in the implementation of the peace agreement. (...)

As special envoy, I will continue to support female-led initiatives. I am pleased the World Bank has allocated \$150m (£98m) to finance gender-based projects, in addition to the \$1bn already pledged for the region. I encourage the donor community to be even more strategic in its support of the framework of hope. It is crucial to demonstrate the economic benefits of a lasting peace based on development – what I call the peace dividend.

Almost six months after the signing of the peace agreement, armed groups are still roaming in eastern Congo, sowing terror and destruction. This is not acceptable. I have heard the region's people voice their frustration and anger at the slow pace of change. However, I am confident that, with the support of civil society – including women – we can succeed in bringing peace to the region.

I have often heard my friend Desmond Tutu, a [fellow member of the Elders](#), say: "I am not an optimist, I am a prisoner of hope." The women of the Great Lakes are keeping my hope alive.

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