

Reflection on the occasion of the Summit of the Heads of State of the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region, Special Session on Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV), “United to prevent, end impunity and provide support to the Victims of SGBV” (15th December, 2011, Kampala, Uganda)

“[S]exual violence is a form of gender-based violence which seriously inhibits the ability of women to contribute to, and benefit from, development, and to enjoy human and peoples’ rights and fundamental freedoms, in private or public life, in peace time or during situations of armed conflict contrary” (Protocol on the Prevention and Suppression of Sexual Violence against Women and Children, Preamble).

On 8th and 9th December, the Justice Law and Order Sector (JLOS), UN Women and the International Center for Transitional Justice hosted a two day meeting in Entebbe on “*Securing Accountability for Conflict-Related Sexual and Gender based Crimes in Uganda: Learning Lessons from International Experiences*”.

Over 40 representatives of government organs, the judiciary, Ugandan and international civil society, and staff of international criminal tribunals participated in the dialogue which examined the challenges involved in investigating and prosecuting perpetrators of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) crimes during conflict, including pursuing justice for such crimes within a transitional justice framework.

In order to ensure more effective justice for victims of SGBV in Uganda, the following were identified by participants as priority areas:

- enhance the investigation and prosecution of SGBV crimes through improved procedural, technical, forensic, infrastructure and witness management and protection capacities;
- ensure the issue of clear policy directives to tackle the crimes committed by all sides of Uganda’s recent conflicts;
- re-examine the provisions, and practices surrounding the operation of the Amnesty Act in light of the crucial imperative of ensuring accountability for SGBV crimes;
- develop an approach to justice and accountability for victims of SGBV that is informed by the broad and diverse experience, and impact of, SGBV during the conflict in Uganda on perpetrators, victims, their families and communities, both in the short and long term and with respect to the range of forms of gender violence which has been experienced. This may include mechanisms of truth-seeking and reparations;
- acknowledge that SGBV is not limited to women and girls but includes violence against men and boys who have also been, and continue to be victims of SGBV during and after conflict;
- acknowledging the role that traditional justice processes play in resolving conflict, fostering reconciliation and reintegration at the community level, encourage cultural and traditional institutions to play a more active role in transitional justice initiatives while promoting and protecting the rights of women and children;

- adopt mechanisms to document and memorialise experiences of SGBV in tandem with consideration of the role which truth telling and truth seeking can play within a new transitional justice framework for Uganda.

It has also been noted that these measures are wholly dependent on the adoption of an adequate national legal, institutional and policy framework that protects SGBV victims. In this regard, attention must be placed on the need to ensure that domestic legislation adequately protects victims of all forms of SGBV and that appropriate mechanisms are put in place to guarantee effective access to justice for victims of SGBV; this includes developing a comprehensive witness protection bill, sexual offences bill, domestic relations bill and national legal aid policy inclusive of women's rights. It also implies the potential need for the adoption of a national policy on SGBV intervention and prevention more broadly.

During the conclusion of the meeting it was noted that the Summit of the Heads of State of the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (the Conference) Special Session on Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV)—*“United to prevent, end impunity and provide support to the Victims of SGBV”*—was scheduled to take place on 15th and 16th December in Uganda. It was acknowledged that the Conference, at which the President of Uganda, His Excellency Yoweri Museveni, would assume the Chair, created an important opportunity to link efforts underway in Uganda with a renewed resolve by states in the Great Lakes region to work collaboratively to put an end to the scourge of SGBV.

It was particularly noted that the Recommendations which had been developed by Ministers of Gender from the Great Lakes Region on the occasion of the Special Summit resonated with a number of the findings and priorities in the Ugandan context which had been identified in the meeting.

As the Special Summit opens tomorrow in Munyonyo—building on the work of thousands of government officials, parliamentarians, experts, members of civil society and others across the region, in collaboration with international partners—it is important that the legal and institutional framework for securing accountability for SGBV crimes and ensuring support to survivors be strengthened and that adequate institutional, policy and administrative measures are implemented in order to ensure protection for victims of SGBV.