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Yale photo exhibit reveals horrors of Congo conflict

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By Mary E. O'Leary, Register Topics Editor

NEW HAVEN — The young woman, barely out of her teens, sits on her bed with her two young children and peers out a window.

Surrounded by a diaphanous curtain of mosquito netting, the image could be an artistic reflection of a home scene.

Life for the three, however, has been anything but normal. Sophie, 20, was kidnapped and held for almost three years in the Congo bush. Raped repeatedly, she had one child in the forest and was pregnant again when she escaped.

The 7-by-10-foot color portrait, printed on fabric and photographed by photojournalist and MacArthur “genius grant” fellow Lynsey Addario, is one of 38 stunning photographs of on-going violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the particularly lethal consequences for women and children.

The exhibition, “Congo/Women Portraits of War: The Democratic Republic of the Congo,” is on display through Thursday at the Thomas E. Golden Jr. Center at Yale University and is part of several events, including a lecture series, staged to turn world attention to a war that has left 5 million dead since 1998, the victims of violence and disease.

But an epidemic number of rapes, 200,000 reported since 1996 and an estimated 3,500 this year alone, has brought focus to gender-based violence as a weapon of war.

Christine Schuler-DeSchryver, a Congolese human rights activist, calls it “femicide.” In an e-mail from Congo, she said the photographs help bring attention to the unfolding tragedy she and others, including playwright Eve Ensler, are fighting.

“If we had to relay the stories and atrocities we face here, nobody will believe us. New words have to be created to describe this femicide,” Schuler-DeSchryver wrote from Bukavu, in the eastern part of the country where the war continues.

Uma Ramiah, a Yale University graduate student in African studies and religion, helped bring the critically acclaimed exhibition, created by Leslie Thomas, to the university. In addition to Addario, it features the work of Marcus Bleasdale, Ron Haviv and James Nachtwey.

Previously shown at the United Nations and on Capitol Hill, it has helped start conversations about the rapes, which often lead to obstetric fistulas, particularly for young girls.

This condition leaves them with no bowel or bladder control. They become pariahs, doubly ostracized from communities: first for the rape, secondly for their physical condition.

Many others require multiple operations in a country with little medical help after the “sexual terrorism” of rapes committed with physical objects, according to Schuler-Deschryver.

“The point of the photographs is that you can connect to them immediately, especially on this scale. It’s kind of like a boom impact. There is an accessibility here,” said Ramiah, 26, who spent several months in Congo and other parts of Africa, where she was a freelance reporter.

Grim statistics accompany the production put together by Thomas, who is executive and creative director of Art Works Projects.

According to the statistics, the average lifespan of a woman in Congo is 46 years; 1.3 million adults live with HIV/AIDS in the region; 800,000 children are orphaned by AIDS; and 20 percent of children do not live beyond age 5.

The images are powerful and disturbing: A 14-year-old rape victim sits alone facing a wall, her pregnancy hidden from the viewer; a displaced woman looks stunned standing in front of a refugee camp; a mother, whose arm was cut off when she tried to defend her children, nurses a toddler; a 70-year-old rape victim sits in profile.

Jason Stearns, 33, a doctoral candidate in political science at Yale who spent eight years in Congo working for the United Nations and human rights organizations, described the situation as “the worst humanitarian catastrophe of our time.”

Congo President Joseph Kabila was elected to bring about peace and has united much of the country, formerly called Zaire, which is about the size of Alaska. But he has been criticized for adding to conflict in the northeast border with Rwanda, where violence continues.

Despite the \$1.3 billion U.N. investment and presence of 17,000 peacekeepers, Stearns does not expect the war, a mix of territorial, ethnic and criminal interests, to end for another decade.

He does believe, however, the United States can start to turn that around by playing “midwife” to establishment of a transparent state in Congo and the training of a professional army, which is now responsible for about half the rapes in the country. He said the West needs to get at root causes, rather than just symptoms.

Stearns said that for many years the U.S. had limited interest in Congo, but he sees a new attitude in the Obama administration, which talks about a moral duty to help stop the suffering.

“The Congo is the litmus test” for that humanitarian intervention, he said.

John Prendergast, of the “Enough” project, is looking to step up accountability around “conflict minerals” in Congo, specifically tantalum, which is used in cell phones, video games, digital cameras and other electronic gadgets.

The minerals are exploited by numerous militias in Congo and Rwanda, and he is encouraged by legislation in the U.S. Senate and House that would require companies to disclose the origin of materials, similar to the “blood diamonds” movement that targeted Sierra Leone.

Eventually, companies stopped buying diamonds that fueled the armed conflict in that country.

Prendergast was encouraged by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s recent visit to Goma, Congo, in the heart of the conflict, the first for a high American official. Clinton promised \$17 million to fight sexual violence, which she called “crimes against

humanity,” and said steps needed to be taken to regulate the mineral trade.

Prendergast said the industry has been more responsive lately, adding that consumer pressure will be key.

Thomas works closely with Prendergast, Human Rights Watch and other groups working for the same cause. She has found getting her exhibit “in public spaces engaged a much broader audience than ‘preaching to the choir.’” She plans to take the exhibit to Europe and Africa.

Thomas encouraged the public to get involved. “People can really make a difference. It is not hopeless,” she said.

The local exhibit hours are 9 a.m. to midnight tonight; 10 a.m. to midnight Monday to Thursday. For more information, contact www.enoughproject.org, www.raisehopeforcongo.org, www.congowomen.org.

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