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## Call for Tough Action to Stop Violence Against Women; Amnesty International wants Legal Redress for Innocent Victims of Conflict

By Olivier Lucazeau

[London] – Raped, treated as the sexual “booty” of war or slain by indiscriminate bombings, women are too often the first victims of conflict, Amnesty International has charged in a report demanding legal redress.

The London-based human rights group yesterday called for action by the International Criminal Court to halt oppressive violence against women.

“Patterns of violence against women in conflict do not arise ‘naturally’ but are ordered, condoned or tolerated as a result of political calculations,” its secretary-general Irene Khan said in introducing the 120-page report on women in war

Not only are women “considered as the legitimate booty of victorious army”, the report said, but “the use of rape as a weapon of war is perhaps the most notorious and brutal way in which conflicts impact on women”.

“Women’s bodies, their sexuality and reproductive capacity are often used as a literal battleground,” it said.

Khan, the first woman, the first Asian and the first Muslim to head Amnesty International, said: “It’s quite interesting to see that women’s rights have been used as justification for military intervention in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan.”

But she added: “On the ground, the situation changes very little in favour of women ... In the case of Afghanistan we have seen no improvement.”

“Warlords are not being pulled out, they’re not being prosecuted, they’re not being investigated for the crimes that are openly committed.”

Even where women were not deliberately targeted, they were the main victims of so-called collateral damage: “In Iraq last year, US forces reportedly used more than 10 500 cluster

munitions containing at least 1.9-million bomblets. An average failure rate of 5% would mean that about 90 0000 unexploded munitions are now on Iraqi soil.”

The report urged the International Criminal Court to “pick up and prosecute one or two high-profile cases because that will send the message that violence against women cannot continue in such an impunity, which is the norm today”.

The court, headquartered in The Hague, began operating in July 2002 and is mandated to try genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Khan acknowledged the way ahead would be tough, but said she hoped the report would generate pressure for change.

Women and children make up 80% of the world’s 40-million refugees, but they have no voice, and injustices go unpunished, she added.

“If you take the example of the Korean women, the comfort women in Japan, who were used as sex slaves in World War 2, even now they’re still battling for recognition of their case,” Khan said.

The report detailed widespread rape in conflicts around the world, including the Darfur region of Sudan, Colombia, Nepal, Chechnya, India and, earlier this year, in the tiny Pacific territory of the Solomon Islands.

Tens of thousands of women and girls were raped during the conflicts sweeping the Democratic Republic of Congo.

“Ten years on from the genocide in Rwanda, where violence against women was a central element of the strategy to eliminate a particular ethnic group, little or nothing seems to have been learned about how to prevent such horrors,” the report said.

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