Defender profile: Dr Denis Mukwege from the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Dr Denis Mukwege is a surgeon and one of the most prominent human and women’s rights defenders in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), his home country. On the occasion of the 2016 International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights in Geneva and screening of the documentary film *The Man Who Mends Women*, ISHR had the pleasure of meeting Dr Mukwege and co-sponsoring a discussion with him and Navi Pillay, former UN High Commissioner for human rights and ISHR Board member. Dr Mukwege detailed his grassroots and advocacy activities to defend women’s dignity, and exposed the risks and threats he faces due to his work.

Dr Mukwege started his career as a paediatrician, after being inspired to become a physician while visiting children with his father, who was a pastor. Mukwege wanted the sick to receive medicines and be provided care as he had been. He soon realized the need for maternal care, and returned to medical school to become an obstetrician gynaecologist in the early 1980s. In a wish to enhance women’s conditions of delivery and reduce widespread maternal mortality, he dedicated himself to running the Lemera hospital for more than 15 years, when the war broke out in DRC.

His hospital bore witness, on 6 October 1996, to the genesis of the conflict; many of the patients and staff present on that day slaughtered by soldiers, which initiated a decades-long series of massacres against civilians in the country.

“I met the special representative of the UN Secretary-General two days after the massacre and told him the tragic end that had met my innocent patients, killed in their beds for no reason. I deeply regret that the international community was not informed at this point about the serious human rights violations taking place.”

After his hospital was destroyed, Dr Mukwege became an internally displaced person and moved to the city of Bukavu. He resumed work as a practitioner and opened a makeshift maternity ward in a camp, but the circumstances of the very first operation he performed there triggered his journey down a more activist path.

“The first victim I treated was a woman who had been raped then shot in the genitals and in the legs. (...) It was in September 1999 and at the end of this year 45 similar cases had unfortunately been registered (...) I therefore called upon Human Rights Watch and they wrote the first article on the issue of *The War Within the War: the war on women’s bodies* in 2001. Realising that such practices are still ongoing 15 years later raises a lot of questions. We have tried to raise awareness and provoke change
The shift from surgery to advocacy

Since this time, Dr Mukwege has dedicated himself to the surgical restoration of women victims of war rape and sexual violence. He founded Panzi Hospital where victims receive free medical care as well as judicial and psychological support. His greatest pride, he says, is to see some of his former patients becoming in turn vocal women human rights defenders claiming their own and others’ rights to life, health and dignity.

In 2007, Dr Mukwege took his advocacy activities to the international level after realising that some of his new patients were “second generation” victims of rape: young girls born to women rape victims, who had themselves become victims of rape. For Dr Mukwege, this signalled the need for him to speak up for the women of his country on a larger scale; outside hospitals and outside the country.

“I then realised that it was an endless vicious circle and that the only way to put an end to it was to raise awareness about it. There was no point continuing to deal with the consequences without addressing the causes of the problem. This is how I started my international advocacy activities, a long and hazardous journey.”

Advocating under threats and reprisals

While renowned as the “doctor who mends women”, praised by thousands of women in his country and receiving several international human rights awards for his work, Dr Mukwege is also one of the most at risk human rights defenders in the DRC.

Invited in 2011 by the United Nations in New York to deliver a speech about his country, intimidation by a Congolese government official, including veiled threats against him and his family, caused him to walk away from the opportunity at the last minute.

In 2012 he was the target of a kidnapping and murder attempt at his home upon his return from a trip to New York and Geneva, where he had exposed the situation of women in the DRC to UN bodies and representatives. His guard and friend lost his life trying to protect him. Since then, Dr Mukwege and the Panzi Hospital have largely received civilian protection provided by the UN.

His interventions in Geneva last month, on the occasion of the 31st session of the Human Rights Council and the 14th edition of the International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights, raised concern among Congolese army officials who informed some TV channels of their “discontent”.

The urge to unveil the truth and fight impunity

Despite these permanent lurking dangers, Dr Mukwege intends to intensify his advocacy towards the international community and ensure the situation of women and civilians in the DRC is not forgotten. He says he appreciates that the international discussion on rape in the context of war has finally started, but nonetheless regrets that the situation of his country, the human rights violations and the atrocities perpetrated over two decades still gain insufficient international and media attention.

“I think that what is happening in the Democratic Republic of Congo should raise the attention of more human rights defenders. We sometimes have the feeling that there is some double standard in the way human rights violations are being dealt with. As if the situation in Congo did not mean anything to anybody and that Congolese victims did not count. Yet we do share the same Humanity...”

Given the pervading impunity that has kept perpetrators away from courts and/or prisons and left victims helpless in the DRC for over 20 years, Dr Mukwege calls on the international community to step in and hold those responsible for human rights violations internationally accountable. He calls for the UN to set up international mixed courts (as was the case in Cambodia or Sierra Leone) that would bring perpetrators before both national and international judges.

Business against human rights: the heart of the Congolese tragedy
Dr Mukwege is convinced of one fact: the root causes of the conflict in the DRC are first and foremost economic.

“There is a desire to destroy a population in order to exploit their natural resources. And the gravest thing is that this war is being conducted on women’s bodies for vile economic motives.”

The commercial interests of major international companies and neighbouring countries, who seek to benefit from these resources, are at odds with the need for national level accountability for human rights violations against civilians. Indeed, it is the destabilisation of Eastern Congo that facilitates the massive exploitation and exportation, both legal and unlawful, of minerals used for, among other things, the production of electronic devices worldwide.

In this regard, Dr Mukwege sees the international community in general, the UN and human rights defenders worldwide in particular, as the key actors with a role to play in bringing a human rights perspective to the debates on the DRC.

To date, Dr Mukwege and his fellow surgeons, physicians, clinicians, and staff at Panzi Hospital and Maison Dorcas, the aftercare facility supported by Panzi Foundation DRC and Panzi Foundation USA, have treated more than 46,000 women and girls (ranging from two months to 87 years old) who were victims of rape used as a weapon of war, of conflict, and other forms of sexualised violence in DRC, often accompanied by acts of torture.

In 2008, Dr Mukwege launched the Panzi Foundation DRC to expand services to the wider population within South Kivu and support the ongoing work of Panzi Hospital through a variety of initiatives. In 2011, the Panzi Foundation USA was launched to support both institutions. Follow him on Twitter @DenisMukwege @PanziFoundation, and @PanziUSA. He may be found on Facebook at http://facebook.com/DrDenisMukwege.