Voices of Sisters
Ministry

People gather with sisters after a church service in the town of Kiwanja, Rutshuru, Democratic Republic of Congo. (Stephano Kambale)

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April 27, 2023

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Editor's note: *Global Sisters Report's series Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas offers a look at the lives and ministries of women religious serving in dangerous places worldwide. The news stories, columns and Q&As in this series will include sisters in Ukraine, Nigeria, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Nicaragua and more throughout 2023.*

We are living the daily life of nuns in conflict zones. Specifically, we are living in the Masisi and Rutshuru territories of the Democratic Republic of Congo, under the umpteenth occupation by the M23 (the March 23 Movement), a rebel group that emerged in the aftermath of the war. They are made up primarily of ethnic Tutsis, and are said to be supported by the Rwandan government.

We are staying to give a voice to the general population. We have been interviewing Christians and non-Christians alike, about their perception of war, their relations with the M23 rebels, and the way in which they impact on the ministry of the religious sisters.

The local population appreciates the sisters and their work, but for women in general and for nuns in particular, war sometimes leads to a radical break with peace and their human rights. Women have become "spoils of war" since immemorial times. Their lifestyles have been profoundly changed because, caught in the midst of armed groups, they are victims of rape, killings, massacres and extreme violence. The nuns living in the territories occupied by the M23, and who failed to flee, are not

immune to these basic rights violations.

We therefore experienced a break in the social bond with the basic ecclesial communities to which we are attached and for which we offer our religious ministry in hospitals, maternity wards, schools and the like, because a great number of the population has fled from these zones. Radio Okapi said that 90% of the population fled!

In this context of warlike turbulence, we sisters have used an adaptation strategy. We cannot go into the villages; people come to us. So we thought it was important to find out how war has impacted the living conditions and the mission of the nuns living among the populations in Masisi and Rutshuru territories in Congo.

We did individual interviews with 14 people, including three religious sisters living in the conflict zones under M23 occupation, collecting data that we then analyzed from the dialogue with those who live in these areas.

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On analysis, these populations living in M23 zones are experiencing indescribable violence. Most of our interviewees blame two facts:

First, the foreign and ethnic character of the so-called M23 Rebels makes them ruthless in perpetrating rapes, summary executions, mass killings, massacres, looting, vandalism and destruction of basic infrastructure such as health centers, schools, administrative buildings, and churches.

As in the past, the Rwandan Tutsis of the M23 armed group are inflicting a revenge war against the Bantou populations (including their brothers, Rwandan Hutu refugees, present in the subregion) and their new occupation of the territories is ephemeral — they raise a lot of money and return home to Rwanda and Uganda from where they came.

Second is their impunity: The most formidable criminals are granted favors like ranks or ministerial posts. It turns out that, for some time in Congo, socio-professional promotion has been linked to the number of people killed on any occasion, whether peaceful demonstrations (authorized or not), rebellions, strikes or aggression.

People attend a presentation by Catholic artists in the town of Kiwanja, Rutshuru, Democratic Republic of Congo. (Stephano Kambale)

The people we interviewed do not understand this because the demands that made their own leaders generals in the armed forces of Congo and its government have been the same since the Congolese Rally for Democracy (a political party and former rebel group supported by Rwanda) and the National Congress for the Protection of the People (CNDP), a political armed militia established in 2006.

Moreover, they do not understand how these killers claim the right to take up arms against an ethnic minority of Rwandan Tutsis in the country that has granted them hospitality as refugees or colonial workers.

In the murderous tragedy organized by the M23 rebels in Masisi and Ruthuru, women generally are paying heavy tolls. Mothers are frequently raped. Girls are raped in front of their parents, then taken away to serve as sex slaves in the bush.

Women, girls, and children watch helplessly as the men who failed to escape are beheaded. There are reports of young people being beaten to death for putting up the slightest resistance to compulsory marches in support of the rebels.

Women are at the same time forced to provide food (like beans, bananas, potatoes, goats, cassava) for the rebels. Some of them are then killed.

Congolese women gather in the churchyard in the town of Kiwanja, Rutshuru, Democratic Republic of Congo. (Stephano Kambale)

The religious sisters do not escape the fate reserved for all women. In Masisi and Rutshuru, several parishes and convents were systematically looted and destroyed. The people we interviewed said that the priests and nuns who were unable to flee are not there of their own will; they are forced to stay.

Only a few motorcycles circulate in the region. Vehicles are another rebel bait. Even though some priests continue to celebrate Mass, their situation is difficult. The people recognize that with this war, nuns have much more difficulty in carrying out their usual missions in hospitals, schools, orphanages or other charitable actions for the poor.

The religious sisters agreed that their missions are not very active. It is particularly difficult for them to go to the villages for fear of being raped or killed by the M23

rebels.

Nuns also say that since the war is political, nobody can predict exactly the time it will end. They have adopted a strategy: Members of the basic ecclesial communities are called to come to them. For those with educational missions, they cannot carry it on while schools are closed or serving as military camps. Other nuns do health work in hospitals and maternity wards where even the rebels receive their medical care.

Nurses and lay collaborators of the Sisters of St. Chrétienne are seen during a feast of the congregation’s foundress in the town of Kiwanja, Rutshuru, Democratic Republic of Congo. (Stephano Kambale)

All the people we interviewed affirm that the war waged by the M23 has had a negative impact on living conditions on all people in the Masisi and Rutshuru territories. The insecurity is total, and sisters are worried about the situation. Their missions have become increasingly more difficult to carry out during the war.

But, in perspective, they accept their current life as linked to their spirituality of offering themselves as a gift to God by exercising their missions through sharing the suffering of others. Their optimism and trust in God encourages them to pray even more.

They said they pray a lot for peace to return, which, by the grace of God, is not impossible. And perhaps — not for the first time — the end of the M23 movement rumbles on the horizon.

This story appears in the **Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas** feature series. View the full series.