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Ritual Cannibalism Stalks Congo's Remote East

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By Fiona O'Brien

BUNIA, Congo (Reuters) - High on drugs and war, the militiamen took the Rwandan woman to a public place. There, before a large crowd, they mutilated her, cooked parts of her body and ate them.

Elizabeth Tebuka was in the crowd in a remote village in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo when the woman was attacked by Lendu militiamen.

"They cut her breasts off and grilled them and the heart too," Tebuka said, standing in a ramshackle camp for thousands who have fled fighting in the region.

"Then they ate it. And the flesh from her thighs. There were lots of them, I don't know exactly how many because I fled."

The Rwandan woman was attacked because her nationality linked her in the minds of the Lendu militia to the rival Hema tribe, who they believe are backed by Rwanda.

What Tebuka witnessed took place about a year ago, but there are many recent tales of ritualistic cannibalism.

Renewed killings in the town of Bunia have thrown the region back into the spotlight, but they are just the latest horror stories in a conflict which has dragged on for years.

A French-led force of 1,400 peacekeepers is due to start arriving in Bunia next week to try and stop the bloodshed, carried out by drugged militiamen and child soldiers with machetes who prey on defenseless civilians.

The recent violence is ethnically driven, pitting Hemas versus Lendus, both tribes manipulated by political players wanting a stake in the region's mineral-rich soils.

Decapitations, rapes and looting are common. Stories of cannibalism have repeatedly emerged, ritualistic eating of body parts which the militias think give them special powers.

Evelyne Chika now sits in a camp near Bunia's airport, where thousands took shelter after an upsurge in fighting last month. Militiamen killed her mother and all five of her brothers.

"When they killed my mother they cut off both her hands and her legs from the knee," she said, her collarbones sticking through the cloths which are the only clothing she possesses.

"With her sons, they ripped off their genitals. They were buried like that. I didn't see them eat but the fact I found their body parts missing, I am sure they were eaten."

DESPERATE EAST

Congo's war began in 1998, and has killed an estimated three million people. Though a peace process has brought hope of an end to the wider war, fighting continues in the eastern jungles. Jerome Bunu left his home about 16 miles from Bunia around a year ago and has moved many times since. A Hema, he says he used to live side by side with Lendus. But gradually, the Lendu began taking drugs and mounting attacks.

In a raid on his village, the militias murdered his son.

"When we came back to retrieve the body three days later, we saw they had taken the tongue and heart from my son," he said. "They also ripped off his genitals. From that I am convinced that people kill and they eat."

There is some optimism in Bunia that the planned multi-national force may bring security, but experience of the current U.N. mission, unable to stop the violence because of its limited mandate, has made people wary.

"If they come and they bring peace it will be a good thing," said Dzebi Ngujona, sitting in a camp swarming with flies. "It is difficult now. We are only waiting for peace. That's all."

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