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Securing Justice for Victims of Sexual and Gender Based Violence

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In July of 1982, the Guatemalan army constructed a military outpost intended for “rest and relaxation” in Sepur Zarco, where it assigned a regiment of soldiers. Over the next six years, women from surrounding communities found themselves summoned to the base to serve the soldiers. What they were told was their responsibilities would include cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes for the soldiers. What they were not told was that over that period the soldiers would repeatedly rape the women throughout the duration of their time spent there. According to the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission, many of those victims were stigmatized by their communities and cruelly blamed for the atrocities committed against them. Nearly 30 years later, several of the victims made the momentous decision to come forward with their stories of violence and exploitation.

A sexual and gender based violence expert from a rapid deployment roster managed by Justice Rapid Response (JRR) assisted Guatemalan authorities on cases such as Sepur Zarco, steeped in details of kidnapping, sexual violence, torture, forced disappearances, and human exploitation and trafficking. The work of that SGBV expert has now led to the early stages of a project with the government under JRR’s Complementarity Programme, in which experts in the investigation and prosecution of mass atrocities, will be working together with and assisting local authorities, through capacity building and focused mentoring.

In launching Justice Rapid Response, Ashoka Fellow Andras Vamos-Goldman has delivered a promising new dynamic in the pursuit of justice, one which aims to improve the capacity of international and national justice systems while establishing a new standard of promptly initiated, reliably organized, and diligently executed criminal investigations. The JRR initiative allows for especially rapid deployments of meticulously selected experts from around the world. The diverse geographic representation of experts on the roster ensures investigations by experts with a cultural, legal, religious and linguistic affinity with the place and people involved in the investigations.

Since its launch in 2009, Justice Rapid Response has certified over 550 experts from over 95 countries. The professionals on the roster include some 60 categories such as criminal and

human rights investigators, legal experts including prosecutors, forensics specialists, police and military analysts, sexual and gender based violence investigators, witness protection and management specialists, and intelligence analysts. Once nominated, trained and certified, these experts are then deployed on short notice by JRR at the request of entities with the mandate and jurisdiction over situations where mass atrocities have been committed, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the United Nations, as well as states themselves.

Within the main roster there exists a dedicated SGBV Justice Experts roster consisting of almost 150 experts, which has been key to ensuring that the investigation of SGBV remains an essential component of conflict-related investigations. As has been a harsh reality in conflicts across most of human history, rape and other forms of gender-based violence continue to be used as a tactic of war in places like Syria, Iraq, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The DRC has especially known the burden of ongoing violence against women and children. In one particularly urgent case, Bosco Ntaganda, a Congolese war criminal sought since 2006 by the ICC, has been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Ntaganda was the leader of a rebel group known as the M23, which had a hand in executions, rapes, and the forced recruitment of children.

JRR was quick to provide an SGBV expert to the ICC to help assemble a case against Ntaganda, who was eventually charged with 18 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, six of which are crimes of sexual and gender-based violence. The inclusion of an SGBV investigator, and the evidence that investigator collected, resulted in ICC Judges unanimously confirming - for the first time - all sexual and gender based crimes charges sought by the Prosecution.

The methodological standard set by JRR, consisting of rigorous recruiting and innovative training of experts from around the world, is already transforming the quality and progress of investigations internationally. The question of rampant impunity is a daunting one, but JRR's answer is clear and simple: accountability for gross human rights violations is not an option but a responsibility. To say the very least, that responsibility will not be taken lightly.

This article was written by [Justice Rapid Response](#). Andras Vamos-Goldman, the Founder and Executive Director is an Ashoka Fellow.