CRS: Doctors in Congo helps ease plight of female victims

CAPE TOWN, South Africa – A church-run training program for rural doctors in the Democratic Republic of Congo has helped ease the plight of women in the war-torn eastern region where sexual violence is common, an aid worker said.

Because of the program, run by the U.S. bishops' Catholic Relief Services, doctors are able to help the seriously wounded, mostly rape victims, at village hospitals, said Lane Hartill, regional information officer for CRS in West Africa.

Otherwise, doctors would have to tell patients to walk long distances to bigger centers "on almost impassable roads in atrocious condition," he told Catholic News Service in a mid-February telephone interview from Dakar, Senegal.

Dr. Freddy Mubuto, 32, whom Hartill got to know on a recent visit to Congo from Dakar, where he is based, worked alone for two years at Nyamibungu hospital in South Kivu province before another doctor joined him this year.

Mubuto found it heartbreaking to refer his patients to Panzi hospital in Bukavu, eastern Congo's top medical facility, knowing that most of them would have to walk the 135 miles or be carried through the mud on "what resembles a goat track more than a road," Hartill said.

"There isn't much transport because the roads are so bad," he said.

After a training course at Panzi hospital provided to rural doctors in South Kivu last year by CRS, Mubuto is now able to perform simple operations to repair damage to women who have been raped, Hartill said.

Mubuto's Nyamibungu hospital serves a population of more than 100,000 people. Nyamibungu is close to a jungle that serves as a hiding place for Rwandan Hutu rebels who fled rather than face prosecution at home for their involvement in the 1994 genocide against Tutsis, Hartill told CNS. These men are notorious for their violence, and villagers told him that they "come into the village at night and rape

women and steal crops."

Warring rebels and militias signed a cease-fire in late January in eastern Congo, where conflict has raged for years despite the formal end of the country's 1998-2003 war. Some 800,000 people were forced to flee their homes in the past year and sexual violence in the region has escalated, reported the British news agency Reuters.

Mubuto and other eastern Congolese doctors "see the results of brutal rapes where women are violated with guns and sticks," Hartill said.

The surgery Mubuto and other rural doctors are now able to perform is "life-changing for these women, many of whom are left incontinent after the attack," Hartill said. Rape victims are generally "cast aside and ignored in their villages," he said.

And malnourished children now line up to see Mubuto, Hartill said.

"That didn't happen before the war – everything grows in Congo; it's a greenhouse," he said. "But now with militias stealing crops and villagers displaced because of the fighting, Mubuto sees more and more malnourished children."