



# How do you convince rebel groups to abide by laws on sexual violence?

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A Seleka fighter smokes during a patrol, close to the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo June 10, 2014. REUTERS/Goran Tomasevic

While covering the London **summit** on ending sexual violence in conflict, I came across one thing you wouldn't normally pick up at work: A booklet used to train rebel fighters on the dos and don'ts of sexual violence in conflict. It's filled with cartoon illustrations of women being raped, men kicked in the groin, and others seeking help and justice.

The booklet is produced by Geneva Call, an NGO that works to encourage rebel groups and other so-called non state armed groups to abide by international laws on the issue.

"We want the groups to take ownership of the issue, not do it because they feel they have to," Chris Rush, senior programme officer for Asia at Geneva Call, said at a meeting on the fringes of the summit.

Armed groups which are not part of a national military cannot sign international treaties, including those which relate to international rules of war. This means rebel groups and others may not feel bound by international laws that they have not proposed, or formally agreed to.

Some are not even aware of the international laws that ban the use of sexual violence in conflict, laws enshrined in the Geneva Conventions and several U.N. Security Council resolutions, and upheld by the International Criminal Court and others.

Geneva Call is encouraging these groups to **sign an agreement** to abide by international humanitarian laws, and be held accountable for their actions.

The agreement, drawn up by the organisation itself, covers not only the behaviour of fighters, but also commits them to prevent sexual violence in areas under their control, to facilitate others to help victims, and even eliminate discriminatory practices within their group.

Many armed groups don't rape, and most conflicts do not involve systematic or even widespread sexual violence.

Where it does exist, the reasons vary from lack of discipline and opportunism, to the strategic use of sexual violence to destroy communities and instil terror, or to build cohesion within an armed group.

**Government soldiers are more likely to**

**rape** than rebel groups, according to recent research.

Myanmar is a case in point. “There is no evidence of (non-state) armed groups having policies of sexual violence, or even more than isolated cases of sexual violence. But there is a huge sexual violence problem in Burma, and the perpetrators are on the government side,” Rush said.

In March this year, a Myanmar group called the Chin National Front signed a deed of commitment. The Myanmar government last week signed the **U.N. Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict**.

“If armed groups are able to make concrete commitments to addressing sexual violence, it puts the spotlight on the government,” Rush said.

“Of course, it’s very, very encouraging that the government has signed the declaration, but it’s very early days to know whether they will abide by it or not,” he added.

The Chin National Front does not have a track record of sexual violence. But even when armed groups don’t use sexual violence as a weapon of war, signing a deed of commitment can help them

take steps to address random acts of violence.

“This is one of the reasons why Geneva Call looks to get groups that don’t even have a bad track record ... often they are faced with an issue in their organisation and they may not know how to deal with it,” Rush said.

Helping groups work out where they need to improve their practices to prevent individual fighters from using sexual violence, and training fighters to respect the rules is part of the battle.

What’s also hard is tracking their progress. Monitoring the use of landmines is relatively simple, but monitoring sexual violence “is very complex”, Rush said.

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