Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary discusses Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative

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Cathy Newman, presenter: New efforts to deal with one of the most horrific consequences of that conflict – mass sexual violence against women. Britain is about to dispatch a team of doctors, detectives and other experts to the Syrian region to investigate allegations that rape is being used repeatedly and deliberately as a weapon of war.

The brutality in Syria has, according to the United Nations, reached “appalling heights”. The opposition now fears the uprising has claimed more than 40,000 lives, but as well as the lives lost, there are many thousands of lives ruined too – not by bombs or bullets, but by another weapon of war: rape. After meeting his team of experts, the Foreign Secretary told this programme that within weeks the Government will be taking the unprecedented step of deploying doctors, investigators, psychologists and lawyers to the Syrian region to gather evidence to bring the perpetrators of rape to justice, evidence likely to be gathered too in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Last week, the M23 rebels marched on the city of Goma. Both sides are accused of appalling abuses. Rape has become a fact of life here for 15 years now. This woman was raped in 2002 by the Hutu militia. A decade on, she still fears her attackers will return, so her identity has been concealed.

Unnamed woman, victim of military rape [translated]: I don’t know those people, and I don’t know where they are now, and I couldn’t follow up, because if I tried to investigate, those people would come back and they’d kill me.

Cathy Newman: It’s thought 12% of women in the Congo have been raped at least once, and the figures elsewhere in the world are just as shocking. Up to 50,000 women were raped during the Bosnian conflict in the 1990s; 64,000 women and girls were sexually assaulted in Sierra Leone between 1992 and 2002, and 400,000 were raped during the hundred-day genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Justice for the victims remains elusive, though – only 30 men have been convicted of rape committed during the Bosnian War, and a sense of outrage about that was what persuaded Angelina Jolie, the actress turned UN envoy, to make a film about the Bosnian rape camps, In The Land of Blood and Honey. The Foreign Secretary happened to see it, and says today it inspired him to launch a global campaign to tackle war zone rape, and forge an alliance with one of Hollywood’s biggest stars.

Well, William Hague and Angelina Jolie plan to join the experts gathering evidence in the field next year, and earlier I went to speak to both the Foreign Secretary and the Hollywood star at Mr Hague's official country residence in Chevening in Kent. I began by asking the Foreign Secretary about the deployment to the Syrian region.

William Hague (Foreign Secretary): Well, one of the things we will be doing is deploying the team that we've now assembled. We've assembled a team of 70 doctors, lawyers, forensic experts, psychologists who can be deployed in the field; in the case of Syria, helping Syrian refugees – they're going to be training local health professionals to gather the medical evidence, to get the forensic evidence and documentation that can be used in prosecutions in the future. So this is a practical example of what we can do, and we'll be having other deployments over the coming year.

Cathy Newman: Well, you've been to many war zones. Do you think it's realistic, in a war zone, in a war situation, to deploy a team in this way and actually gather evidence?

Angelina Jolie (Special Envoy, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): Absolutely. I think it's… I think it must be done. I think it's a… it… you know, I work a lot with refugees, people who are internally displaced, people who have just fled from conflict. I was in the Syria conflict particularly recently, on four different borders, and you meet the people the moment they cross – and they immediately want to start talking. They want to know what's happening to their future, they want to participate. They want to put on record what's going on in the country; they want things not to be missed, and they want to know that one day, they'll be able to go home, and there will be accountability. And so it matters to them emotionally, and it matters to the future of their country on a legal level that they will be able to find some justice and impunity, move forward, and have their basic human rights protected.

Cathy Newman: Talking about where this is happening now, it's really a, kind of, cruel coincidence of timing, isn't it, that the trouble in the Congo has, sort of, flared up, at just the moment you're really stepping up this campaign. Is there a sense, do you think, that the M23 rebels, when they marched on Goma, that the UN really stood by and failed in its duty to protect those civilians – some of whom were being raped?

Angelina Jolie: It's a very, very complex situation, and I know in particular I reached out to UNHCR, and we talk often about – daily – on reports what's happening, and I know that the team there on… for UNHCR is extremely frustrated that they can't access the people, they can't get to the internally-displaced people because of… because of the violence, until there's a ceasefire, until there's a… they actually can't reach them. That's a particular part of the UN, that brings aid relief and is able to be present, and they can't get there.

Cathy Newman: Is that your understanding? That it was the practicalities of the issue that meant that the troops weren't there in sufficient numbers?

William Hague: Of course, the area we're talking about, enormous, the numbers of troops very small, the support from neighbouring states – not there; so all of these problems are present there, and the leadership has to come from within the region to sort this out, but the pressure to do that and, if necessary, the resources to help to do that have to come from the rest of the world.

Cathy Newman: You've been to many war zones – Darfur, Iraq, Afghanistan; I've missed many, I'm sure – what did you witness there on this particular issue, of rape in the war zone, that really, sort of, inspired you to back this campaign?

Angelina Jolie: For me, this campaign came about with… we came together on a film I'd worked on that…

Cathy Newman: The Land of Blood and Honey.

Angelina Jolie: …The Land of Blood and Honey – which came from these years in the field where I'd continued to meet victims of sexual violence who… you know, had just seen no justice, and had felt isolated and abused, and abuse upon abuse because they had felt ignored. But you start to… I started to lean very much towards the law, and to understand that when people don't know their rights and they don't know they can fight for it and they don't have… any rape, any kind of sexual violence that would happen to anybody in this room, the perpetrator would be arrested, we would see justice. Millions and millions of people around the world don't have that. It's a shame, and it's something that… how dare we not do something? So it was helping to give them a voice, and trying to understand myself what more needs to be done to assist them.

William Hague: And this film is one of the inspirations behind the British Government's campaign, you know – it's so good, it's so clear, it's so horrifying. It brings to life the statistics. But I think what Angelina achieved with the film was really to bring that to life, to… so that it's not just something that's out of mind and out of sight. It removes anybody's excuse for not doing anything.

Angelina Jolie: And, I mean, there's so much talk.

Cathy Newman: There's a lot of bureaucracy.

Angelina Jolie: There's a lot of bureaucracy, and there's a lot of talking, and it just… and when we first started to speak about this, and I learned about the initiative, it was… it wasn't about, you know, how we can go there together and talk; it was something very practical that had to be done – it was a… 'there will be an absolute'… you know, 'there's people on the ground, there are things being done, there will be results, it will move forward'.

Cathy Newman: Some people might be a little bit cynical, seeing you sat there next to a major Hollywood star. What do you think Angelina Jolie brings to your campaign?

William Hague: Well, Angelina was instrumental in the campaign, because – as I mentioned a moment ago – her film about what happened in Bosnia was certainly, to me, one of the main motivating factors in getting this campaign going; but of course she… Angelina brings her experience as an envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, having visited so many countries, and the ability to mobilise opinion and to attract attention to these things.

Cathy Newman: To get it talked about.

William Hague: And that's one of the things that we have to do. This has been a subject that for too long has been not talked about – it's taboo in some countries to talk about it. It's not been the main focus of attention, even in countries like our own, in international affairs.

Cathy Newman: And when you hear people's stories repeatedly over the years, as you have done – obviously their world is so far removed from, you know, the world that we all inhabit. Do you… how do you empathise with what you're hearing?

Angelina Jolie: How can we live in a world where people are abused in such fashions, where young, you know, girls and boys are being raped so violently?

Cathy Newman: Well, you nod at that – I mean, you're famously, you know, unemotional.

Angelina Jolie: Are you famously unemotional? That's so interesting.

William Hague: The Foreign Secretary has to be, yes.

Angelina Jolie: I as… am I famously emotional and you're famously unemotional?

William Hague: It's quite a combination, isn't it?

Cathy Newman: I wasn't saying you're famously emotional.

Angelina Jolie: That's…

William Hague: It's quite a combination.

Angelina Jolie: That's why we're a combination.

Cathy Newman: But, I mean, even you have been… "even you", I say – OK. You've been moved by what you've heard.

William Hague: This is one of the worst things happening in the world today, and a world that has mounted campaigns against a slave trade, that is on the edge of agreeing an Arms Trade

Treaty ought… is a world which ought to be able to do something about this. So yes, even the unemotional Foreign Secretary feels very, very strongly about this.

Cathy Newman: Do you ever think that what you're doing on a humanitarian basis is so much more, sort of, time-consuming and more rewarding, potentially, than what you do in your acting, and…

Angelina Jolie: Oh, of course. Yeah.

Cathy Newman: All the time?

Angelina Jolie: Yeah. Yeah, of course. I mean, I wouldn't…

Cathy Newman: Does that ever make you think you'll give up the acting and focus purely on the…

Angelina Jolie: I think I'm going to have to give up the acting as the kids hit the teenage years anyway, because… you know.

Cathy Newman: Too [unclear].

Angelina Jolie: There's going to be too much to manage at home. But…

Cathy Newman: That's [unclear].

Angelina Jolie: You know, I… you know, I've enjoyed being an actress, and I'm so grateful for the job, and I've had great experiences, and I've even been able to tell stories and be a part of stories that mattered. And I've also done really just things for fun and, you know, hopefully… but…

Cathy Newman: But you're speaking in the past tense there, as if from now on…

Angelina Jolie: I'll do some films, and I am so fortunate to have the job, you know. It's a really… it's a very lucky profession to be a part of, and I enjoy it. But if it went away tomorrow, I'd be very happy to just be home with my children, and I would… you know, I wake up in the morning as a mom, and I turn on the news like everybody else, and I see what's happening in the world, and I want to be a part of the world in a positive way.

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