



By: TA | AP Insight

Victims testify to numerous sexual assaults by Russian forces in Mali



Multiple women have told The Associated Press they survived or witnessed alleged rapes and other sexual assaults committed by a new Russian military unit in Mali, where it is assisting the military in hunting down extremists.

Men, women and children have been sexually assaulted by all sides during the conflict, the U.N. and aid workers say, with reports of gang rape and sexual slavery.

But few cases are reported. Aid workers and others cite a veil of shame that makes it difficult for women from conservative, patriarchal societies to seek help.

That silence also hurts efforts to hold perpetrators accountable.

The AP obtained rare access to the border with Mauritania where thousands of Malians have fled. Refugees also alleged **other abuses** including indiscriminate killings and beheadings.

Africa Corps earlier this year replaced the **Wagner mercenary group**, and refugees said it has taken up Wagner's tactics.

Legal experts say Russian authorities are directly responsible for the fighters' actions since they report to the defense ministry. Russia's defense ministry did not respond to questions.

Allegations of assaults

One victim was a 14-year-old who contracted a severe infection related to sexual assault, according to a doctor who treated her. Her family said she was raped by Russian soldiers. They and others spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

The AP learned of four other alleged cases of sexual violence, including what women described as attempted rape by Africa Corps fighters, who were widely described as the "white men."

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One woman said she defended herself "by the grace of Allah" after armed men entered her home and undressed her. Another started crying and could not stop trembling. She had scratch marks on her neck. She was not capable of telling her story.

"We are still terrified by what we went through," she said.

A third woman said that what the men did to her in Mali when she was alone in the house "stays between God and me."

A fourth said she had watched several armed men drag her 18-year-old daughter into their house. She fled and has not seen her daughter again.

The AP does not name victims of rape unless they agree to be named.

Abuses by all sides

Other combatants in Mali have been blamed for sexual assaults.

The head of a women's health clinic in the Mopti area told the AP it had treated 28 women in the last six months who said they had been assaulted by militants with the al-Qaida affiliated JNIM, the most powerful armed group in Mali.

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Abuses are under-reported because of fear of reprisals and limited access to care in addition to the shame around sexual assault, according to the U.N. and aid workers.

“People undergo these things and they live with it, and it shows in post-traumatic stress,” said Mirjam Molenaar, a medical team leader in the border area with Doctors Without Borders, or MSF.

Previous accusations against Wagner

Allegations of rapes and other sexual assaults occurred when Wagner mercenaries were in Mali. One refugee said she witnessed a mass rape in her village in March 2024.



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“The Wagner group burned seven men alive in front of us with gasoline,” she said. Then they gathered all women and raped them, she said, including her 70-year-old mother.

In the worst-known case of sexual assault involving Russian fighters in Africa, the **U.N. in a 2023 report** said at least 58 women and girls had been raped or sexually assaulted in an attack on Moura village by Malian troops and others that witnesses described as “armed white men.”

In response, Mali’s government expelled the U.N. peacekeeping mission. Since then, gathering accurate data on the ground about conflict-related sexual violence has become nearly impossible.

Difficulties in accessing help

It can be difficult for refugees to know help is available. The refugee camp on the Mauritanian border is full, with over 150,000 people.

Another 3,000 have crossed the border in the past month as fighting in Mali intensifies.

The new arrivals settle far from the camp in fragile shelters of fabric and branches. MSF opened a free clinic nearby in recent weeks. It has seen three survivors of sexual violence.

Aid workers worry about the many women who never say a thing.

“We know from the stories shared that there is a huge need,” MSF’s Molenaar said.