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### **Congo Women Empowered to Change their Fate**

ALARM Congo, together with our US partners continue to empower Congo women to not accept what is happening to them as normal even when the silence and attitude of the rest of world towards their brutal sexual violence seems to be telling them, “we don’t care about you, we can live without you.” These women leaders from different ethnic groups and various denominations in eastern Congo are saying, “we can change our fate and that of our nation.”

This week, (March 21-26, 2011) ALARM Congo brought together in the city of Goma (eastern Congo) 40 women leaders from different regions of eastern Congo (Bukavu, Bunia, Butembo, Goma, Masisi, and Rutshuru) to discuss, learn and be trained in women’s rights, justice, peacebuilding, conflict resolution, forgiveness and dealing with the trauma of sexual violence.

Armed conflicts among Congolese and Rwandan armies and among various Congo and Rwanda rebel groups have not only caused further hatred and animosity between different tribes in Eastern Congo, but have also spawned an epidemic of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Most disturbingly, the sexual violence perpetrated by the armed army and rebel militia groups has increasingly become a normal occurrence among civilians.

According to “Now, the World is Without Me,” a report commissioned by Oxfam International and carried out by experts from Harvard University, about 56% of sexual assaults were committed by armed men in homes while in the presence of the victim's families, including their children. About 16% reported were in fields, and 15% in forests. Incidents of sexual slavery were reported by 12% of women surveyed, with some held hostage for years. The number of rapes increased during military operations. More than 9,000 people, including men and boys, were raped in 2009 as the government and its Rwandan military allies moved against Rwandan militia groups operating on Congolese soil (<http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/now-world-without-me>).

ALARM believes by empowering African women and by building a wider network of empowered women with skills and tools to mitigate any oppressive forces (cultural, economic, social, political, spiritual, religious, etc.), they will learn to no longer accept as normal the atrocities perpetrated against them but will gently but persistently fight for their rights and seek peace and justice while bringing hope, healing, reconciliation, and transformation to their communities. Most of the women in Congo are saying, “we can become wounded healers and bridge builders in our communities. We refuse to be defined by our miseries. We instead want to learn how to turn our pain into instruments of hope and healing to our families and communities. Instead of demonizing and dehumanizing each other's tribes and building more walls of division, we want to become reconcilers of relationships in our communities.

The 40 women gathered in Goma are part of the ALARM Congo Women's Network for Peace and Justice whose goal is to connect and empower Congo women involved in peace, justice, and reconciliation through support, training, and advocacy for the restoration of women's rights and dignity, and for the transformation and reconciliation of families and communities in Congo. Like Rev. Zan Holmes, Jr. of St. Luke Community United Methodist Church in Dallas says, “community bridge builders are walls turned sideways,” ALARM is empowering the Congo women to become bridge builders in their communities and between fighting tribes in eastern Congo.

In May, August, and October this year, ALARM, together with these women, will train and equip 200 other women leaders in their respective regions. Funding for this project is not complete and \$120,000 is still needed to bring this dream to a complete reality. ALARM is waking a sleeping giant by empowering African Women to say, “No, We are Part of the World. We are the World.”