

Shame as rape victims give birth

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PARIS, Feb 15 (AFP) - One more repercussion of the Rwandan tragedy is beginning to emerge as thousands of women give birth to children conceived when they were raped during last year's ethnic carnage.

Apart from the wholesale massacre of up to a million people, largely minority Tutsis, but also moderate members of the Hutu majority, at the hands of Hutu extremists, large numbers of women suffered rape, according to humanitarian organisations.

"The rape of women was systematic, both arbitrary and planned, as a weapon of 'ethnic cleansing' to destroy fundamentally the ties within a community," child psychiatrist Catherine Bonnet said recently after a two-week visit to Rwanda.

While no exact figure can be given, Bonnet estimated from evidence gleaned during medical consultations that the majority of adult women and adolescent girls who were not slaughtered were raped.

Called by their unwilling mothers

"the children of bad memory," the offspring of these violent unions face ill-treatment or even death, Bonnet said.

Health workers in the Rwanda capital, Kigali, suspect that many women are giving birth, alone and in secret, then dispose of the child. Others may give birth in clinics for their own safety, but deliberately stop feeding the baby once they return home.

Bonnet said the new Tutsi-led authorities in Kigali turn a blind eye to abortion, while hesitating to legalise the practice because the Roman Catholic church still has a great influence in Rwanda.

Some women, however, are determined to keep their children, even if they were conceived in violence, though they face being made outcasts in a society which tends to view their rape as equivalent to adultery because there is no legal acknowledgment that an offence has been committed.

"A wall of silence and shame sep-

arates men from women, husbands from wives, daughters from parents or brothers, when there is no such recognition and no reparation for the prejudice suffered," Bonnet said.

This denial of justice must be remedied to enable social harmony to exist in Rwanda, she urged.

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