

# Emergency Contraception in War Zones

## Reproductive health care saves lives, especially in conflicts or natural disasters.

In a war zone, women and girls are targeted for rape. For these women and their children, who make up approximately 80 percent of all refugees,<sup>1</sup> emergency contraception is often critical to their health and well-being.

### What is emergency contraception (EC)?

Emergency contraception (EC), often referred to as Plan B, is emergency birth control that prevents pregnancy after rape or unprotected sexual intercourse.

- EC does not interrupt an established pregnancy.
- EC can reduce a woman's risk of becoming pregnant by 60 - 99 percent.<sup>2</sup>
- EC is effective if used up to 120 hours (5 days) after unprotected intercourse and is most effective the earlier it is taken.<sup>3</sup>



### Why is EC important for women affected by conflict?

Florence is a 45-year-old woman who had fled with her family from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to neighboring Zambia for safety. One day Florence, her 13-year-old daughter and two women friends left their refugee camp to collect firewood necessary to cook food for their families. During the walk home, the women and girl were attacked and stripped naked by a local group of men; all were gang raped for several hours.

For women and girls living in the turmoil of war or conflict, this is not an uncommon story. Many women who experience tragedies like Florence's are then also subject to possible death in childbirth or unsafe abortion, or are forced to bear the child of their rapist because they have little or no access to EC.

- \* **EC plays an important role in responding to rape.** Rape is widespread in war and EC is crucial for women and girl's health. Given the limited medical care in refugee camps, unwanted pregnancy or unsafe abortion could spell death.
- \* **EC can be used as back-up if other contraception fails.** Because of the dangers of unsafe abortion and childbirth in war zones, contraception alone is not enough. Condoms fail between 9 and 14 percent of the time.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UNFPA. [State of the World Population](#). 2002.

<sup>2</sup> International Consortium for Emergency Contraception. [Emergency Contraceptive Pills: Medical and Service Delivery Guidelines](#). Second Edition, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

- \* **EC is important for women unable to negotiate condom use.** Women affected by conflict often lose their homes and income. Some turn to prostitution or other exploitative sexual relationships to support themselves and their families. Their partners may refuse to use condoms and they have limited power to persuade them.

## What should be done?

After the attack and rape, Florence made her way to her refugee camp health center because she had sustained a large machete wound to her hip. During her consultation with the doctor, she spoke about the rape and immediately received counseling. She also chose to take antibiotics in case she had contracted a sexually transmitted infection and decided to use EC even though she was 45 years old. Florence encouraged her daughter and friends who were also attacked to visit the health center, which they did. They each received treatment and EC and none of them had an unwanted pregnancy.

Florence's story of treatment should not be an exception:

- \* Humanitarian workers must be trained to administer EC and understand its importance for women.
- \* Health care staff working in war zones or refugee camps must make EC available from the very beginning of a crisis.
- \* Refugees and others affected by war should be informed (by humanitarian relief workers) about what EC is and how to access it.

## What can I do?

- \* **Get informed!**
  - o Sign up for news and updates from the International Consortium on Emergency Contraception (ICEC): [www.cecinfo.org](http://www.cecinfo.org).
- \* **Help yourself and others who may need EC!**
  - o Need to find an EC provider near you? Worried about the side effects? Get the answers at [www.not-2-late.com](http://www.not-2-late.com).
- \* **Take action!**
  - o Ask congress to generously fund life-saving reproductive health care for refugee women and girls in the foreign aid budget. <http://capwiz.com/wc/home/>

With your help, more women like Florence will have safer and healthier lives.

## Reproductive Health Care Saves Lives

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<sup>4</sup> Trussell J, Vaughan B. Contraceptive failure, method-related discontinuation and resumption of use: results from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth. *Family Planning Perspectives* 1999;31:64-72.