

DR Congo 'worst place to be a mother' (Update)

May 7 2013

The Democratic Republic of Congo has displaced Niger to gain the unenviable distinction of being the worst place in the world to be a mother, according to a new report by Save the Children.

Countries in sub-Saharan Africa took up each of the bottom 10 places for the first time in the 14 years that the report has been produced by the London-based charity.

Finland took the top spot, with its Nordic neighbours filling the other leading positions.

The charity's "State of the World's Mothers" report issued Tuesday compared 176 countries in terms of maternal health, child mortality, education and levels of women's income and political status.

It called for investment to close the "startling disparities" in maternal health between the developed and developing world and for a push to fight inequality and malnutrition.

The report found that a woman or girl in the DRC, which has been wracked by conflict for years, has a one in 30 chance of dying from maternal causes—including childbirth.

In Finland the risk is one in 12,200.

"By investing in mothers and children, nations are investing in their

future prosperity," said Jasmine Whitbread, Save the Children International chief executive.

"If women are educated, are represented politically, and have access to good quality maternal and child care, then they and their children are much more likely to survive and thrive - and so are the societies they live in," she added.

"Huge progress has been made across the developing world, but much more can be done to save and improve millions of the poorest mothers and newborns' lives."

After DR Congo, the next worst countries were listed as Somalia, Sierra Leone, Mali and Niger.

The Save the Children report was issued the same day as the Red Cross issued an appeal for 10 million Swiss francs (\$10.6 million, 8.2 million euros) to help fund work in DR Congo this year, bringing the total amount needed to 68 million francs.

"What we are observing on the ground is an accentuation of the conflict," International Committee of the Red Cross chief Peter Maurer, who visited the troubled country last month, told reporters in Geneva.

Armed movements "are forcing thousands of people to flee with nothing but the clothes on their backs," he said, also warning about sexual violence and threats against health workers.

Rape of women and girls is endemic to conflict in the DR Congo, perpetrated by members of the regular armed forces as well as by rebel forces and tribal militias.

The Save the Children report blamed high death rates for babies across

sub-Saharan Africa on the poor health of mothers—citing figures which show 10 to 20 percent are underweight.

It also highlighted the number of mothers giving birth "before their bodies have matured", the low use of contraception, poor access to satisfactory healthcare and a dearth of health workers.

The study identified four potentially lifesaving products which it claims could be rolled out universally.

They are corticosteroid injections to women in preterm labour; resuscitation devices to save babies who do not breathe at birth; chlorhexidine cord cleansing to prevent umbilical cord infections and injectable antibiotics to treat newborn sepsis and pneumonia.

The top countries after Finland were Sweden, Norway, Iceland and the Netherlands, with the United States—the world's biggest economy—trailing in 30th place behind Slovenia and Lithuania.

The report blamed the poor US placing on its "weaker performance on measures of maternal health and child-wellbeing".

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