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DR Congo: End The Horrific Suffering in Eastern Congo ***63 Leading NGOs Press for Urgent Implementation of Goma Peace Agreement***

(London, April 23, 2008) - The government of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the armed groups, and international parties to the Goma peace agreement should urgently implement the accord and end the horrific suffering of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children facing brutal violence and deadly diseases in eastern Congo, 63 international and Congolese human rights and aid groups said in a joint statement today.

The non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are urging the United Nations and the international players that helped negotiate the Goma agreement to appoint a high level independent special advisor on human rights for eastern Congo to focus attention and ensure action on protecting civilians at risk, specifically women and girls threatened by sexual violence. It also urged the international players such as the African Union, European Union, and the United States to support the appointment politically and financially.

“Hundreds of thousands of victims clung to the hope that the peace deal would end their suffering. Sadly, no meaningful progress has been made on human rights commitments,” said Anneke Van Woudenberg, Senior Researcher at Human Rights Watch. “We urge for the immediate appointment of a special advisor on human rights to help the parties honor their human rights commitments and to provide a voice for the victims who suffer in silence.”

On January 23, 2008, after weeks of talks, the Congolese government signed a peace agreement in Goma, North Kivu, with 22 armed groups committing all parties to an immediate ceasefire and disengagement of forces from frontline positions. Yet since the signing, scores of civilians have been killed, hundreds of women and girls raped, and many more children recruited into armed service, adding to the extraordinarily high number of civilians who have already endured such crimes over the past decade.

An estimated 1.1 million people are displaced in North and South Kivu provinces, of which 550,000 fled from the fighting since 2007. Malnutrition, cholera, malaria and other preventable diseases are taking their lives at an alarming rate.

“This is a humanitarian catastrophe on an enormous scale. It demands urgent and concrete action by all parties to the agreement as well as by the international community,” said Colin Thomas-Jensen, Policy Advisor of ENOUGH, a project to end genocide and crimes against humanity. “Getting the parties to sign an agreement was an important first step, but now we must move to the next step of helping people return home in safety and security.”

Humanitarian agencies still face difficulties accessing civilians at risk and human rights defenders who have raised concerns about the abuses face threats and harassment. Armed groups, as well as the Congolese military, continue to illegally exploit natural resources and use the profits to fuel the conflict.

Special envoys from the African Union, the European Union, the United States, the United Nations and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region played a vital role in negotiating the Goma agreement. They agreed to continue to play an active role in monitoring and implementing its terms.

Under the terms of the peace accord, the parties agreed to respect international humanitarian and human rights law, including ending all acts of violence against civilians, halting the recruitment of child soldiers, assuring the release of political prisoners, and allowing access for humanitarian agencies.

Last week, Human Rights Watch made detailed recommendations on ways to appoint the special advisor on human rights for Eastern Congo to Abbé Apollinaire Malu Malu, the independent national-coordinator appointed by the Congolese government to lead its peace efforts, and the international community representatives. The organization urged Abbé Malu Malu to bring about this appointment, emphasizing that since human rights concerns were central to the conflict, failure to respond to such issues could cause the peace process to collapse.

The recommendations included that the special advisor be appointed either by the signatories to the Goma agreement, by the Secretary General of the United Nations, or by the international sponsors of the agreement.

Juliette Prodhon, Head of Oxfam in DRC said, "Without the appointment of a special advisor on human rights it will be far harder to hold parties to account for violating the peace agreement. For the sake of the Congolese people and the whole Great Lakes region, this investment in human rights is needed to help avoid a return to conflict that has already claimed too many lives."

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The group of international and Congolese human rights and aid organizations includes:

International NGOs: ActionAid International, the American Bar Association, Association of Volunteers in International Service (AVSI), CAFOD, ENOUGH, Front Line, Global Witness, Human Rights Watch, International Alert, International Rescue Committee, Oxfam International, Light of Africa Network, Medicos en Catastrofe (MEC), Mercy Corps, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Population Services International/Association de Santé Familiale (PSI/ASF), Rights and Accountability in Development (RAID), Refugees International, Save the Children UK, Saving Lives through Alternate Options (SLAO), World Vision (Eastern DRC).

Congolese NGOs: Action Contre l'Impunité pour les Droits Humains (ACIDH), Action Pour la Promotion et la Protection de l'Enfant et de la Femme (APPEF), Action Sociale pour la Paix et le Développement (ASPD), Association africaine de défense des droits de l'homme (ASADHO/SUD KIVU), Association des Filles et Mamans Victimes de Violence (AFMV), Association pour la Promotion de la femme et de l'enfant pour le développement durable (APROFED), Association des Volontaires du Congo (ASVOCO), Association des femmes Pour la Conservation de la Nature et le Développement Durable (AFECOD/CRAF), Campagne Pour la Paix, Change Agent Peace Program (CAPP), Centre d'Ecoute Hermone (CEH), Centre de Recherche sur l'Environnement, la Démocratie et les Droits de l'Homme (CREDDHO), Centre National d'appui au développement et à la participation populaire (CENADEP Kinshasa), Centre Olame, **Children's Voice** - North Kivu, Coalition Publiez Ce Que Vous Payez RDC, Commission Provinciale de Lutte Contre les Violences sexuelles au Sud Kivu (CPLVS), Comité des Observateurs des Droits de l'Homme (CODHO), Collectif des Organisations des Jeunes Solidaires du Congo Kinshasa (COJESKI Nord-Kivu), Commission Episcopale Justice et Paix, Conseil Régional des Organisations Non Gouvernementales de Développement (CRONGD-NK), Fondation Point de Vue des Jeunes Africains Pour le Développement (FPJAD), Group d'Etudes et d'Actions Pour un Développement Bien Défini (GEAD), Groupe Justice et Libération, HEAL Africa, Héritiers de la Justice, Ligue Congolaise pour la défense des droits de la femme et de la famille (LICODEFF/ Kinshasa), Mamans Organisées pour le Développement (MAODE), Plateforme des Femmes du Nord Kivu pour un Développement Endogène (PEFND), Promotion de la Démocratie et Protection des Droits Humains (PDH), Promotion et Action des Femmes pour le Développement (PAFED), Promotion et Appui aux Initiatives Féminines (PAIF), Réseau Femme et Développement (REFED/Nord Kivu), Réseau des Associations de lutte contre les violences en général (RALCOVIG), Réseau Provincial des ONGs de Droits de l'Homme au Nord-Kivu (REPRODOC Nord-Kivu), Regard Rural Sans Frontière (R2SF/Sud-Kivu), Réseau d'Initiatives Locales pour le Développement Durable (REID), Réseau pour la Conservation et la Réhabilitation des Ecosystèmes Forestiers (CREF), Solidarité féminine pour la paix et le développement intégral (SOFEPADI), Solidarité Pour la Promotion Sociale et la Paix (SOPROP), Synergie des Femmes pour les victimes des violences sexuelles, Villages Cobaye (VICO).
