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Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UN HUMANITARIAN CHIEF: “STORIES THAT GO BEYOND THE IMAGINATION”

(Kinshasa/New York, 6 September, 2007): In South Kivu Province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. John Holmes, today visited Nyamarhege, where he met recently internally displaced persons and non-governmental organisations.

Since the beginning of 2007, there have been 63 attacks on civilians in the area by the rebel group FDLR/Rastas, near where, in May, assailants massacred 18 civilians, including women and children, wounded 27 and kidnapped 10 people in two villages close to Kaniola. There are 60,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nyamarhege area as a result of attacks like these. In some villages over 80 per cent of the population is displaced and staying with host families. As a result of insecurity and fear, people are practicing “night commuting,” moving to relatively safer areas where the DRC army or the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) are located. Meanwhile, humanitarian agencies, including UN agencies and non-governmental organizations, are undertaking programs to meet the humanitarian needs in the area. The displaced told the ERC that their one wish is for peace, which would allow them to support themselves.

Mr. Holmes next went to the General Referral Hospital of Panzi, located 20 kilometres south of Bukavu in South Kivu, a non-profit health centre that focuses on improving the quality of medical care for the population, reducing the maternal and infant death rate, and providing treatment for survivors of sexual violence. Since its opening in 1999, the facility has provided treatment to 15,000 people.

Dr. Denis Mukwege, head of the hospital, told the ERC that women are now coming to Panzi to seek asylum, anticipating that they will be raped. He also noted that mortality rates among children of rape victims are much higher than in the general population. The victims are often publicly raped by multiple perpetrators—as many as seven – frequently in front of their families and communities. One-third of the survivors are shot or stabbed in their genitals and therefore require complex surgical procedures. In the first six months of this year, in South Kivu alone, 4,500 cases of sexual violence have been reported. The real number is many times higher.

In talking to patients at the hospital, Mr. Holmes stressed the critical importance of helping those who have been raped so brutally, and of punishing those who have committed such heinous crimes so that impunity no longer serves as an incentive to violence. Sexual violence, he said, is a societal cancer, and its perpetrators, by debilitating women, debilitate the entire social and economic fabric of eastern Congo. Most important, he said, is to prevent these crimes from happening, so others do not suffer the same fate. “I cannot work miracles,” Mr. Holmes said, “but I can be the voice of all of you who remain voiceless.”

The ERC also acknowledged, in the midst of such horrific violence, the courage of both the survivors and the hospital staff.

“I am not the same person now as I was when I walked in here – I have heard stories today that go beyond the imagination,” Mr. Holmes said. “I cannot find the words to describe what I have heard today. The only thing I can say is never again. I will remember these stories for the rest of my life.”

On his return to Bukavu, Mr. Holmes will visit a centre for rehabilitating child soldiers and will meet the provincial vice-governor. On 7 September, he is scheduled to travel to North Kivu Province, where fighting has displaced more than 10,000 civilians since 27 August 2007. Since December 2006 North Kivu has been ravaged by violent clashes leading to the displacement of more than 224,000 people.

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