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Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UN HUMANITARIAN CHIEF VISITS DISPLACED IN NORTH KIVU

(Goma/New York, 7 September, 2007): Today, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. John Holmes, travelled to North Kivu Province in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In his meeting with humanitarian organisations in Goma, they emphasised that limited access, due to insecurity for both aid workers and beneficiaries, is limiting the ability of humanitarian organizations to respond effectively.

The ERC then travelled to the area around the town of Mugunga, 10 kilometres west of Goma and 15 kilometres east of Sake, where three sites are sheltering displaced persons. The town of Sake has virtually emptied of its approximately 26,000 inhabitants, and the environs of the town have also been virtually emptied of their estimated 4,000 inhabitants. While the three sites had pre-existing displaced persons, many thousands more have arrived over the past two weeks, including those who have fled fighting and those who have fled pre-emptively. In some cases, families are now moving to locations according to their ethnicities. While families are still being registered and needs assessed, preliminary indications are that needs will include food, shelter, and water and sanitation.

“It is neither normal nor acceptable that you have to live this way,” Mr. Holmes said in his address to the displaced. He told them that the United Nations and its partners would try to get more resources and would carry on assisting them as much as possible. He also said that he would, upon his return to New York, address the United Nations Security Council on the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Finally, he noted the need for a political solution to the situation.

Since December 2006, the eastern North Kivu province in the DRC has been ravaged by violent clashes leading to the displacement of more than 295,000 people. Some find refuge with host families while others stay in camps where living conditions are extremely difficult. The total number of displaced in North Kivu, currently under revision, comes to 745,000, not including the latest wave of displacement. Over 2,100 cases of sexual violence have been reported so far this year in the province, with children accounting for 30% of the victims.

In a meeting later in the day with the Provincial Governor, the ERC discussed, among other issues, the need for all parties to respect humanitarian space and to allow aid workers to deliver much-needed humanitarian assistance.

Yesterday in Bukavu, the ERC visited a centre for former child soldiers, who had variously fought for RCD-Goma, for the FDLR, and for the Mayi Mayi, and some had fought for more than one group. Their greatest wish, they said, was for peace. One 17 year old boy was recruited at age seven after rebels burned his village. “Since I have been here (at the centre), I can sleep,” he told Mr. Holmes. “My battlefield nightmares have ended. I hope that peace will return soon. As you are a father, I ask you to help us and to assist the displaced and our families in North Kivu.”

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