

United Nations Nations Unies

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

PROTECT CIVILIANS AND GUARANTEE HUMANITARIAN ACCESS IN NORTH KIVU, DRC, SAYS UN HUMANITARIAN CHIEF

(New York, 30 October 2008). In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, tens of thousands of men, women and children have had to flee following the latest intense fighting between rebels belonging to the National Congress for People's Defense (CNDP) and the national army. The clashes caused massive displacements in the province of North Kivu, and the conditions for civilian populations have deteriorated rapidly. On 29 October, CNDP advances on the provincial capital of Goma created widespread panic, with many inhabitants leaving the town and its surrounding areas by any means possible. Thousands have followed the contours of Lake Kivu, moving on foot towards South Kivu.

The humanitarian operations of United Nations and non-governmental humanitarian organizations have been severely restricted over the past days. Due to fighting and insecurity, organizations have had to regroup their staff in a limited number of safe areas. Due to lack of access and information, little detailed information is presently available about the situation of civilian populations. Humanitarian actors are working to re-establish communications lines with community leaders. They anticipate significant needs in terms of health, shelter, water and sanitation, particularly for populations that may still be moving. There is also serious concern regarding human rights abuses, most notably sexual violence.

"These military actions do not take place in a vacuum. They can ruin the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. So I call on the government, civilians and all armed groups in the area, in the strongest terms, to protect civilians and to facilitate the work of humanitarian organizations," said John Holmes, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. "We all hope that yesterday's ceasefire will quickly help to restore minimum security conditions and allow humanitarian actors to work with civilian authorities to assess needs and mount emergency operations to address them," he added. "Unconditional access, and respect for the independence, impartiality and neutrality of humanitarians as they go about their essential work have to be a top priority."

Since late August, intensifying conflict and widespread impunity in eastern Congo have resulted in the displacement of an estimated 250,000 people. Most of those forced to displace had already fled fighting multiple times in the past two years. This situation has increased the level of vulnerability of civilian populations, and has severely diminished their ability to cope with new violence and displacements. It is estimated that nearly 70% of the population in North Kivu is either displaced or hosting internally displaced persons.

Of particular concern is the widespread looting of civilian infrastructure, including health centres and homes, in which all belligerent forces in the conflict-affected areas are involved. Agricultural fields are also being stripped, only weeks before harvests were to have taken place. These deplorable acts only serve to increase dependence on outside assistance and prolong the crisis that civilian populations now face. Attacks on humanitarian infrastructure and personnel have also been too frequent.

"All parties to the conflict are responsible for respecting civilian infrastructure and private property, as well as the safety of aid workers. International law clearly requires that they meet these obligations fully," said Mr. Holmes.

Humanitarian actors are currently working to gather information on emerging needs through all sources at their disposal. In the coming days they will be matching existing humanitarian stocks and resources against those needs. "I anticipate that additional resources will be required in order to deal adequately with the latest deterioration in the humanitarian situation in the Kivus and other parts of eastern Congo," warned Mr Holmes.

For further information, please call: Stephanie Bunker, OCHA-New York, +1 917 367 5126, mobile +1 917 892 1679, bunker@un.org; Nicholas Reader +1 212 963 4961, mobile +1 646 752 3117, reader@un.org, John Nyaga, OCHA-NY, +1 917 367 9262, nyagaj@un.org; Elisabeth Byrs, OCHA-Geneva, +41 22 917 2653, mobile, +41 79 473 4570, byrs@un.org. OCHA press releases are available at <http://ochaonline.un.org> or www.reliefweb.int.