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PRESS RELEASE

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC)
Children to be released from armed forces and groups in the East

New York, Kinshasa, 21 April 2009- "Recent developments have opened new opportunities for the release of child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo," noted Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict during a press conference concluding her visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Since January 2009, about 1200 children have been released in the process of the accelerated integration of the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP) and other armed groups into the National Army, the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) in North Kivu. However, grave concerns remain that many children have passed through into the ranks of the newly integrated brigades, as the Special Representative witnessed first hand during her trip to Masisi, where the child protection team met with commanders of recently integrated Mai Mai militias, leading to the on-site release of four children. "Now, a similar integration is about to begin in South Kivu and authorities must guarantee that MONUC, UNICEF and child protection partners are part of the process and have access to the children," said Ms. Coomaraswamy.

In her meetings with the Minister of Defense and Army Generals, the Special Representative received commitments for an Action Plan to ensure the identification and release of children, implementation of preventive measures and access for monitoring and verification to ensure that children are not recruited. "The new Congolese army cannot afford to have children in its ranks and the integration process is a unique opportunity to identify and release them," stressed the Special Representative.

The Special Representative emphasized that the reintegration of these children into their families and communities remains a critical priority for the peace process. UNICEF and other child protection partners pointed out that there are significant gaps in reintegration funding, especially due to the large numbers of children recently released. "It is crucial that donors commit to multi year funding in line with the Paris Principles to ensure sustainability of child reintegration

programmes, and that such resource commitments are flexible and delivered early," added UNICEF Representative Pierrette Vu Thi.

"Sexual violence remains one of the most critical concerns in the DRC, devastating the lives of thousands of girls," said Ms. Coomaraswamy. At a children's transit center in Masisi, she met with girls formerly associated with Mai Mai militias, who told her horrific stories of grave violations, including rape. The Special Representative welcomed the national comprehensive strategy to combat sexual violence developed under the coordination of the UN. She stressed the importance of national ownership of this initiative and has called on President Kabila to appoint a Special Envoy on sexual violence in the Presidency.

Impunity for grave violations against children continues to undermine the possibility of durable peace in the DRC. "Although the Government has taken some positive steps both in the military and civilian sectors to investigate and prosecute violators, such efforts need to be more systematic and include high profile perpetrators," stated Ms. Coomaraswamy. Representatives of civil society and of the Children's Parliament stressed the need to combat impunity as their central message for the Special Representative to convey to national authorities. "Children expressed a deep sense of hopelessness for the future when perpetrators escape accountability for their crimes," she added.

The Special Representative is also concerned about the protection of civilians, especially women and children in the context of the anticipated joint military operations against the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR) in South Kivu, known as Kimia II. She urged the FARDC and MONUC to ensure that civilians are protected during the operation. "The Minister of Defense committed to issue a directive to all FARDC commanders to respect International Humanitarian Law, and to reaffirm that they would be held responsible if grave violations against civilians occurred," announced Ms. Coomaraswamy.

The killing and maiming of civilians, as well as reprisals against communities, during and following similar military operations in the North led to massive internal displacement. "The IDP situation in eastern DRC remains one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world," said Ms. Coomaraswamy. The Special Representative visited an IDP camp of 14,000 people near Goma with more than half of the population in this camp being children living in dire circumstances. She stressed the need for additional financial support to ensure services for children including provision of emergency education and child-friendly spaces and activities.

The Special Representative also visited Dungu in the Province Orientale where close to 1000 people have been killed and nearly 300 children abducted since September 2008 in attacks by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The activities of the LRA in DRC are an alarming recent development and the Special Representative was able to witness the consequences first hand. "Addressing this problem requires close coordination between Government Forces, MONUC and

child protection partners for effective protection on the ground, as well as a concerted regional response," she said.

"The children of DRC have suffered enough. We must guarantee their security and continue to make their protection a central priority in military operations as well as peace-building efforts," concluded Ms. Coomaraswamy.

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