



News Release

2 March 2006

UN LEADERS URGE NEW EFFORT TO END SUFFERING OF MILLIONS IN AFRICA'S GREAT LAKES REGION

BUJUMBURA – The heads of three of the largest United Nations humanitarian agencies today urged the international community to match political progress in the Great Lakes region with a new commitment to end the suffering of the millions of people forgotten by the rest of the world.

After a six-day trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi and Rwanda the three heads of agencies, on their first joint mission to their common operations, said that what had seen and heard showed the need for closer cooperation by all to help refugees, internally displaced people and returnees.

“We have clearly heard their message: ‘Don’t abandon us at this crucial time and risk a return to the bloody nightmare that we lived through for so many years,’” said James Morris, Executive Director of the UN World Food Programme, Ann M. Veneman, Executive Director of UNICEF and UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres in a joint statement.

“The courage of the people of the Great Lakes region must be matched by solidarity from the international community. The beginning of the end to this regional crisis is in sight but in order to reach it and rebuild people’s lives, it is vital that we all stand by them and redouble our efforts.”

All three agencies need substantial additional funding for their work in the Great Lakes countries.

The heads of agencies saw both hope and despair almost daily. On Tuesday, they welcomed 400 Congolese refugees returning home from Tanzania at Baraka port in eastern DRC. An hour later, they heard the testimony of victims of sexual violence including a 12-year-old girl, abused by four men, and a grandmother who left her house to look for food and was raped.

“This is deplorable. It’s not fair. It’s not right. As a result of these horrible crimes, people flee and women are too afraid to even cultivate their fields,” said Morris.

“Women and children must be protected. Violence is unacceptable. It must be stopped,” added Ms. Veneman.

DRC has witnessed some of the most vicious fighting in the world since World War II. A six-year war has cost four million lives and 1,200 people still die needlessly every day. More than 3.4 million people have been displaced from their homes and 17 million don't have a steady supply of food.

The three heads of agencies said there was hope with DRC's constitutional referendum and the fact that millions of people had registered to vote in June in the first multi-party presidential elections in 45 years. But this opportunity should be supported by substantial humanitarian assistance both for those people returning and for those who are still under attack in the East.

On their Great Lakes trip, the UN leaders met the presidents of the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi, donors, UN agencies and partner non-governmental organisations. They also met people driven from their homes by attacks in eastern DRC as well as others who have chosen to return home to the three countries after years in exile.

"It is very important to tackle the main problems facing people in the region from a regional perspective," the three heads of agencies said. "Only a regional approach can be effective."

In Rwanda, the three UN leaders congratulated President Paul Kagame and his government for having guided the country from the tragedy of the genocide in 1994 that killed an estimated 800,000 people towards peace, reconciliation and development. But the government estimates that one million people require food assistance for the first six months of this year.

"It is a reality that international aid mainly goes to areas with the most media coverage and this region hasn't been receiving a lot of that," said Guterres during their visit to Rwanda.

The UN leaders flew from Rwanda on Wednesday to Burundi, where 2.2 million people, including refugees and returnees, need food aid in 2006 because of poor rains, crop disease and poverty. They held talks with the president and visited a feeding centre for malnourished women and children.

Ending their Great Lakes mission in Bujumbura on Thursday, Mr. Morris and Ms. Veneman travel to Kenya to meet President Mwai Kibaki while Mr. Guterres goes to Tanzania.

MEDIA CONTACTS:

Stephanie Savariaud, WFP Public Information, Mob. 254 733 528 912

Kitty McKinsey, UNHCR Public Information, Mob. +254 735 33 77 13, Thuraya +88 21 65 11 10 596

Matt Raymond, UNICEF Public Information, Mob. +1 917 349 0872