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D.R. Congo: New Strategies Needed to End Military Impunity, Foreign Arms Transfers and Sexual Violence amidst Rising Terrorism in Eastern DRC

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Annapolis, MD — 05 December 2004 — Survivor's Rights International calls on the international community, the United Nations and the U.N. Security Council to immediately define and implement new strategies that will insure effective and meaningful change in key areas that continue to negatively impact large segments of the population of D.R. Congo (DRC) both regionally and nationally. These areas include impunity, foreign arms transfers, a national epidemic of sexual violence, and demobilization of (especially) child soldiers.

Militias continue to destabilize the Ituri region of Eastern DRC and numerous sources, including MONUC administrators, now privately confer that the MONUC contingent in Bunia has no control over escalating violence. Similarly, the Kivu provinces have continued to suffer from widespread insecurity. (The Rwandan military invasion of eastern DRC on 29 November 2004 will be addressed in a subsequent SRI press release.) Research, interviews and observations in eastern DRC in November 2004 indicate that the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC), the Front for National Integration (FNI), the Armed Forces for the Congolese People (FAPC) and other militias continue to operate with impunity in eastern DRC. The illicit trade in natural resources appears to continue to be a defining factor in regional affairs.

Militias (e.g. UPC) continue to inflame ethnic tensions, reportedly extorting a weekly war tax from local people, committing atrocities against uncooperative citizens and anyone perceived to be supporting rivals. SRI has received credible reports that militias have recently executed child soldiers who left their respective military (militia) camps seeking disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). Militias have abducted reintegrated ex-child soldiers, and brutalized the families and looted the homes of reintegrated ex-child soldiers to send a message to the civilian population to deter the DDR process. The DDR process in the region has reportedly failed, notwithstanding substantial financial input from international donors.

Given rising insecurity over the past month, with assassinations, nightly shootings, and the killing of the Administrative Chief of Bunia's Mudzipella Quarter, the population in

Bunia increasingly sees MONUC as a hostile and aggressive force of foreign military occupation serving an untransparent mission.

Local sources interviewed by SRI staff working in eastern DRC indicate that arms shipments continue to arrive in DRC in contravention of the U.N. arms embargo. International visitors and military personnel in the region have unofficially substantiated these reports. Weapons are reportedly being shipped to various DRC militias from Uganda and Rwanda, reportedly with international backing. Weapons are believed to arrive via the support of local Congolese government officials and commercial businessmen allied with Rwandan and Ugandan military elements, and across the unregulated Lake Albert frontier. The Sudan People's Liberation Army reportedly continues to plunder destabilize the DRC frontier with south Sudan.

SRI calls on the Security Council and the United Nations Observer Mission in Congo (MONUC), and the governments of Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda to immediately delineate a strategy to secure DRC's eastern frontier. Observers in the region question the absence of marine patrol boats or other surface craft on Lake Albert, noting that MONUC maintains at least four high-speed marine craft on the Congo River, and that these MONUC marine units are operating in areas (e.g. Mbandaka) free from the ongoing warfare that characterizes DRC's eastern frontier. SRI has also received reports from MONUC personnel indicating that their hands may be tied in the pursuit of confiscation of reported weapons caches.

Impunity for soldiers, government officials, and commercial agents remains endemic in DRC. SRI research in isolated areas across the country indicates that populations continue to suffer wholesale extortion, racketeering, theft, rape and other violence by local military contingents, often out of sight and unreported.

Sexual violence is a national epidemic in DR Congo, involving all military factions, both current and past military forces involved in the internal affairs of the DRC, and it appears to be sanctioned by all levels of military command. SRI research completed in Equateur, Orientale and North Kivu from September to November 2004 indicates that the scale and frequency of sexual violence committed during the successive wars (1996e2004) is unprecedented and unquantifiable, and that it continues.

All sides in the conflict have targeted women, girls and children of all ages. While sexual violence in the east has received attention, sexual violence in western DRC remains unreported, but equally horrible. SRI has collected hundreds of names of victims (Mbandaka), some who identified attackers by name and affiliated army (e.g. Zimbabwe, DRC, Uganda, Rwanda). Soldiers of all factions have repeatedly raped some girls.

The presence of hundreds of internally displaced girls and women in Mbandaka has spawned commerce in prostitution and survival sex involving both DRC government (FARDC) and MONUC troops. FARDC prey on female sex workers by forcing sexual relations, raping those who refuse, and universally robbing desperate females of their livelihood. FARDC soldiers all over continue to steal and abduct the wives of civilians, and to abduct women and adolescent girls many of whom are impregnated and abandoned. SRI has received a report that girls and women fled Lisala November 28 after being raped by FARDC soldiers.

SRI calls on the UN, MONUC and the international community to implement new strategies to mitigate sexual violence, noting that societal effects will be long-lasting, and that accountability for sexual violence could be easily countered given greater international attention to gender violence in the DRC and a campaign to end impunity and bring the perpetrators to justice. The MONUC communications infrastructure installed nationwide in DRC (Radio Okapi) provides an excellent, functioning tool for raising awareness of sexual violence and the growing campaign to hold perpetrators to account through the International Criminal Court.

Survivor's Rights International continues to collect testimony and gather evidence of acts of genocide and crimes against humanity committed in the Great Lakes region of central Africa. SRI counts sexual violence amongst these crimes and supports the immediate empowerment of the International Criminal Court to bring to justice all perpetrators of crimes committed in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 1996 to present. For further information, please contact Survivor's Rights International's Interim director Adriana Mourad at: adriana_srintl@yahoo.com.