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GREAT LAKES REGION: REFUGEE CRISIS FAR FROM OVER

Dar es Salaam --Despite overwhelming evidence of a continuing refugee disaster in the African Great Lakes, the international community appears to have decided that the refugee problem is over and that there is nothing more they need do, an Amnesty International delegation led by Flora MacDonald, former Canadian Minister of External Affairs, said today in Tanzania.

“The reality is completely different,” said Firoze Manji, Director of the human rights organization’s Africa Program. “Far from being over, the crisis is in danger of worsening. The situation remains perilous, with refugees being attacked in their camps, and some being attacked and killed if they return home.”

In Tanzania, the delegation has raised its concerns about the safety of Burundi refugees.

“In Burundi, there is growing evidence of systematic and persistent attempts to target unarmed civilians,” Mr Manji said. “The scale of these atrocities amounts to crimes against humanity, for which perpetrators should be brought to justice.”

“In a meeting with the Tanzanian President, Mr Mkapa, we have received assurances that no Burundi refugees will be returned to Burundi from Tanzania under any circumstances,” Flora MacDonald said. “In the light of Tanzanian commitments to refugee protection, it is now the responsibility of the international community to tackle at source the human rights violations which have given rise to the refugee crisis in central Africa. Other states in the region should make similar commitments.”

“What is also particularly worrying is that with a counter-offensive already underway by Zairian Government forces against armed groups based in Eastern Zaire, refugees and unarmed civilians in camps situated between the opposing forces may once again be deliberately targeted by soldiers or armed groups -- which can only lead to further massive refugee displacement,” Mr Manji said.

In a report released today, Amnesty International highlights how far the refugee crisis is enveloping central and eastern Africa. The organization is extremely concerned about the treatment of refugees by regional authorities, the role played by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), and at the killings which continue in Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire.

The report argues that governments in the region are forcing refugees to return home to dangerous conditions against their will, in order to meet arbitrary deadlines for clearing camps and to solve what they perceive as a “problem”. The UNHCR and international community have often failed to make immediate and unequivocal protests against such expulsions.

According to Amnesty International’s report, the expulsion of two groups of Burundi refugees, one of at least 48 and another of 126 people, from Tanzania’s Kitale camp in early January has led to tragedy. All of the refugees, with the exception of only four from the group of

126 who may have survived and escaped, were summarily killed by Burundi security forces shortly after their return. Amnesty International welcomes President Mkapa's assurances that these incidents are being fully investigated.

The organization is calling on all other regional governments to similarly halt all forced repatriations to Burundi, Zaire and Rwanda, to stop promoting repatriation to Burundi, Zaire and Rwanda until independent assessment of the human rights conditions indicates that it is safe to return, and to ensure that all refugees are protected from possible further human rights abuses.

The organization is urgently calling for adequate levels of international assistance to be given to host countries to ensure that they are able to meet the basic needs and protection requirements of refugees, particularly given the strong likelihood of further refugee flows in the region.

THE REFUGEE CRISIS -- COUNTRY BY COUNTRY SUMMARY

Tanzania

The Tanzanian Government effectively forced back the majority of its 540,000 Rwandese refugees in December 1996, after issuing a statement in early December "expecting" them to return home by the end of the year. This statement was co-signed by the UNHCR. Refugees who felt it was unsafe to return were not given any other option. There have been some reports of excessive force, ill-treatment and rape of refugees by Tanzanian security forces. Tens of thousands of refugees initially tried to flee elsewhere but were intercepted by Tanzanian soldiers and sent to the border.

Tanzania still has approximately 230,000 Burundi Hutu refugees and close to 50,000 Zairians, with more arriving daily. The government is allowing most of these refugees to remain at the moment, and expressed assurances that no further expulsions to Burundi will take place.

Burundi

Approximately 75,000 Rwandese refugees have also returned or been forced back from Burundi in July and August 1996, after becoming targets of threats and violence at the hands of Burundi security forces.

The human rights situation in Burundi remains grave. As many as 500 returning refugees are reported to have been killed by the security forces, while others have "disappeared". Massacres of innocent civilians continue throughout the country on a massive scale.

Zaire

An estimated 700,000 Rwandese refugees returned or were forced out of eastern Zaire in November and December 1996, following fighting between Zairian army, Zairian armed groups and elements of the former Rwandese army which began in October. Thousands of Burundi refugees were also forced out of eastern Zaire when the fighting erupted there. There are reports that Zairian and Tutsi-led armed groups attacked Burundi refugees to force them to return, and even handed them over to Burundi Government forces at the border.

Approximately 300,000 Rwandese and Burundi refugees remain in eastern Zaire, in and around Shabunda, Tingi-Tingi and Amisi, where they are receiving very little or no humanitarian assistance. Reports from the area indicate that in early 1997 Zairian troops and foreign mercenaries are gathered in the city of Kisangani, from where they have launched an attempt to

retake the territory held by the armed groups. The refugee camps in Shabunda, Tingi-Tingi and Amisi lie between the two forces, raising the frightening prospect that refugees will again be caught and perhaps targeted in the cross-fire. About 5,000 Zairians were reported on 21 January to have fled their homes around Amisi following clashes between members of the Tutsi-led armed group and those of the former armed Rwandese army and militia. The Zairian Government reported on 23 January that it had recaptured Walikale, a town in the North Kivu region.

Rwanda

There are serious concerns for the safety of Burundi refugees at risk of expulsion from Rwanda. On 30 September 1996, 392 Burundians were forcibly expelled from Rwanda to Burundi's northwestern Cibitoke province - an area characterized by a high level of killings by the Burundi security forces and armed opposition groups. There are indications that several hundred Burundi refugees in Cyangugu and Gikongoro, in southern Rwanda, are also being threatened with expulsion.

Refugees returning to Rwanda are entering a situation of increasing tension. Arbitrary arrests, "disappearances" and killings by the Rwandese security forces as well as armed groups allied to the former army continue. Around 800 people were killed in 1996 alone. Following the mass returns of refugees later in the year, further killings have been reported. Returnees from Zaire and Tanzania have been among the victims. There are also reports of killings of civilians carried out by returnees, some of whom are thought to have participated in the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. At least 50 civilians were reportedly killed by Rwandese Government troops this week in northwestern Rwanda.

Uganda, Kenya and Zambia

In Uganda, 3,000 Rwandese refugees, who escaped from Tanzania, face an uncertain future, as do hundreds of Zairian refugees. The Ugandan authorities have stated that they intend to return the Rwandese refugees to Rwanda or Tanzania. A number of Rwandese who attempted to flee Tanzania for Kenya were stopped at the border, and it has been reported that others may have entered Kenya and moved into the Mombasa area. Many Rwandese refugees fled to Kenya in 1994, where they have frequently been harassed by Kenyan authorities, including arrests, short-term detention and threats of expulsion. It has also been reported that over 200 refugees have fled eastern Zaire and arrived at a refugee settlement centre in northern Zambia.

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