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Joint Investigative Mission for Eastern Zaire Meets in Geneva

Press Release HR/4325

GENEVA, 1 May (UN Information Service) -- The three members of the Joint Investigative Mission into human rights violations in eastern Zaire have begun two days of preparatory meetings in Geneva before travelling to the region on 3 May.

The Mission will be briefed by United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations and will elaborate the terms of reference for the Mission and its workplan. The Mission will also hear the views of representatives of the Government of Zaire and of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo/Zaire (ADFL).

In a presidential statement adopted yesterday, the Security Council expressed once again its deep concern over continuing reports of massacres, other atrocities and violations of international humanitarian law in eastern Zaire.

The statement also underlined the importance of the Mission, reiterating its call on the ADFL and others in the region to cooperate with the Mission by ensuring unimpeded access to all areas and sites under investigation, as well as the security of the members.

In opening comments to the meeting in Geneva today, the Officer-in-Charge of the High Commissioner/Centre for Human Rights, Ralph Zacklin, said the Mission had been described as a "litmus test of the good faith and willingness of all parties to cooperate with the United Nations". Mr. Zacklin also noted the strong support from the Security Council and Member States for the Mission.

The Mission was established by resolution 1997/58 of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, adopted by consensus on 15 April. Citing its concern at the lack of respect for human rights and international humanitarian law by all parties, the resolution requests "the Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights in Zaire and on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and a member of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances to carry out a joint mission to investigate allegations of massacres and other issues affecting human rights which arise from the situation prevailing in eastern Zaire since September 1996".

The Special Rapporteur on Zaire is Roberto Garreton of Chile; the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions is

Bacre Waly Ndiaye of Senegal; and the member of the Working Group on Disappearances participating in the Mission is Jonas Foli of Ghana.

The United Nations has engaged the Argentinean group Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense to provide forensic expertise and support to the Mission. Five members of this group will accompany the Mission and are in Geneva for the preparatory meetings. They have expertise in forensic anthropology and forensic pathology and extensive field experience.

Member States were asked to provide financial support to cover the costs of the Mission, which are estimated to be at least \$250,000. To date pledges have been received from (with approximate currency conversions): Belgium (\$100,000), Denmark (\$25,000), France (\$50,000), Germany (\$17,000), Ireland (\$37,000), Norway (\$40,000) and Sweden (\$45,000).

The Mission will also be supported by human rights and information officers as well as security staff from the United Nations Secretariat. The Mission will travel from Geneva to Kigali, Rwanda, on 3 May with a view to travelling by road to Goma in eastern Zaire to begin its investigative work. The Mission is required to report to the United Nations General Assembly by 30 June.