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60,000 people leave displaced camps, but many more need assistance on their return home

GOMA, Democratic Republic of Congo, 10 October 2009 – Ninety per cent of people living in ‘official’ displaced-persons camps around the town of Goma in North Kivu have returned home. The abrupt pace of six camps emptying so quickly in the last few days has taken many by surprise. However, more than 1.1 million people remain displaced in the province and will require continued humanitarian assistance on their return home in the coming months. 91,000 people alone are still located in ‘spontaneous’ displaced sites.

Since peace accords were signed in March 2009, 160,363 people displaced in host families have in fact already returned home spontaneously in North Kivu according to the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The departure of so many people from the camps represents the continuation of a return phenomenon already in process, which UNICEF has been supporting in recent months.

To be durable, it is vital that people’s return home is voluntary, secure and dignified. While the general situation has improved, many return areas in North Kivu still remain insecure and hundreds of thousands of people face daily threats, uncertainty and hardship as they attempt to rebuild their lives.

Pierrette VU THI, UNICEF Representative for DRC said: “Children are particularly vulnerable to separation from their families, and women and girls are more exposed to sexual violence and exploitation, during the return process”. UNICEF’s partner, Save the Children UK, has set up nine centres in return zones in the territories of Masisi and Rutshuru to identify and reunify separated children with their families. Mobile teams are being deployed to monitor children that may get lost on the roads travelled by returning families.

Sexual violence is also a key risk. Heal Africa, another UNICEF partner, has established ten counselling centres where girls and women who have been sexually assaulted can be received and referred to appropriate medical and psychological services.

To inform other humanitarian actors about the needs of returnees, UNICEF’s partner, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), has so far assessed the conditions of 70,000 families in return communities. .¹

Once back home, returnees’ main priorities are rebuilding their homes and starting to cultivate for the planting season.. Since the beginning of the year, UNICEF and its partners, NRC and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), have provided over 138,000 returning displaced people with essential household items and shelter materials to support their re-integration. In the next few days, 8,000 people returning to Masisi territory will receive Family kits. .

¹ All data and analysis from these assessment are available online <http://www.pear.cd/>

With the start of the school year a few weeks ago, the rebuilding of classrooms and distribution of educational materials in return are imperative to ensure children's access to education. UNICEF's 'Back to school campaign' will provide 114,200 children and 2,290 teachers with school kits in the coming days in North Kivu.

Ongoing assistance is also required for those unable to return home, such as the sick and the elderly. The Muganga III camp near Goma has been designated for this 'residual caseload'. UNICEF and its partners will continue to provide these people with healthcare, education, protection, and water and sanitation activities.

About UNICEF

UNICEF is on the ground in over 150 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.

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