

## UNICEF HAS BEGUN NEGOTIATIONS ON A CHILD DISARMAMENT PROGRAMME IN NORTH-EASTERN CAR

BANGUI, 18 May 2007 – UNICEF announced on Thursday that negotiations have started with non-state armed groups for hundreds of child soldiers enrolled in the north-east of the Central African Republic (CAR) to be released and returned to their families.

Discussions have started with the full support of the Government of CAR, who has engaged in talks with the UN Children Fund (UNICEF) since the first UN assessment mission in the Vakaga region identified armed children among the rebels' ranks in January 2007.

General Damane Zakaria, head and founder of the Assembly of the Union of Democratic Forces (UFDR) rebel group that controls parts of north-eastern CAR (close to Sudan's Darfur region), has agreed on releasing some 400 children. A first list of 220 child soldiers has been given to UNICEF last week.

"This UNICEF programme not only contributes significantly to children's welfare, but also helps resolve one of CAR's most pressing problems," says CAR Humanitarian Coordinator Toby Lanzer.

UNICEF is now entering into negotiations with the Government of CAR to study the feasibility of a release agreement after the UFDR has agreed to sign a final commitment in the coming weeks.

Despite CAR not being listed amongst the countries who endorsed the Paris Principles, which call upon State Parties to demobilize children enrolled in armed forces and groups and was signed 6 February 2007, this move signals a voluntary step on the part of armed groups in CAR towards respecting children's rights.

The Representative of UNICEF in CAR, Mahimbo Mdoe, thanks the Government for its openness and support in this process and says that "it is imperative for UNICEF to move fast to free these children from this environment of violence."

UNICEF's support in the release and reintegration of children will be carried out at the community level. Communities will be supported and social services rehabilitated to welcome the released children and to facilitate them in reintegrating back into their families and thus resuming a normal life.

The UNICEF programme will also extend to all the children of north-east CAR, who will benefit from upscaled health care, schooling and recreation activities, protection and security.

### About UNICEF

UNICEF is on the ground in 155 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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