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Nairobi, 11 October 2004 — Over 100 women from the Great Lakes Region have just concluded a meeting in Kigali, Rwanda, where they discussed key issues, challenges and action required to bring peace and stability to the conflict-affected region.

The event, which took place from 7-9 October 2004, is the third regional meeting of the International Conference for the Great Lakes Region, and the first women's meeting. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was a lead facilitator of the event, coordinating the activities of women from numerous countries to ensure that different viewpoints on key issues were adequately reflected, and that national perspectives would feed into a broader regional vision. Besides assistance in facilitating the women's regional meeting, UNIFEM is also providing technical and financial support towards gender mainstreaming within the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region process, through the office of the UN Secretary General.

The series of regional meetings are being organised in preparation for the International Conference, which will be held in November 2004 in Tanzania, under the auspices of the African Union and the United Nations in partnership with Group of Friends for the Great Lakes. Heads of state from Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia will meet to formulate lasting solutions to the endemic problems plaguing the region with a particular focus on promoting peace and security and improving economic and social development.

During three days of deliberations, women repeatedly echoed the pain and suffering endured from sexual and gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS, poverty, and social exclusion and marginalization. The women however, also asserted their historical roles and ongoing contributions to sustaining their communities by providing food on the table, caring for the young, sick and elderly, and receiving returning refugees and internally displaced persons. Women's roles as producers, managers, caregivers, knowledge generators, peacemakers, leaders and innovators were an invaluable contribution requiring recognition and support. Numerous women also demanded greater efforts to address impunity, especially for gross violations of women's human rights during conflict such as wide-scale sexual abuse and exploitation.

At the end of the meeting, participants put forth a Declaration, which will be submitted to the heads of state during the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region in November. The Declaration calls on Heads of State and Government to:

- take concrete measures to end the culture of impunity and enforce punitive action against perpetrators of crimes against humanity particularly genocide, massacres, rape and other forms of gender based violence;
- put in place a regional mechanism with requisite resources to ensure women's equitable representation and effective participation in peace, governance and development processes at national and regional levels
- guarantee economic opportunities for Women to access credit and own property including land
- negotiate as a bloc on economic issues in order to protect women's interests from unfair trade practices and policies
- accelerate ratification of the African Union Protocol on Women's Rights
- ensure that special Commissions in charge of Demobilization, Disarmament, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration to look into specific needs of women ex-combatants, dependants of ex-combatants and all vulnerable groups in reintegration and rehabilitation processes

UNIFEM is the women's fund at the United Nations, providing financial support and technical assistance to innovative programs promoting women's human rights, their economic and political empowerment, and gender equality in over 100 countries.