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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

**Written statement* submitted by Pax Christi International, International Catholic Peace
Movement, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[2 February 2004]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Peace and Reconciliation in the Great Lakes Region of Africa

Located in the centre of Africa, the sub-region of the Great Lakes has for several years passed through a crisis due to the numerous conflicts that its constituent States have known. The conflicts are presently experienced either between certain countries, particular ethnic communities or even still between the countries' authorities and internal armed groups benefiting from the support of other countries. The origins of these conflicts, as complex as they are, go back in fact to the pre-colonial and colonial periods and/or that of independence. This situation has resulted in the deaths of thousands of people, atrocities and widespread sexual violence, massive violations of human rights, enormous migrations of displaced persons and the overall weakening of the authority of the State. The current crisis in the Great Lakes has produced at once serious consequences on the human, economic, political, social and environmental levels.

It is clear that the causes of the conflict vary according to the complexity of each country's particular situation, its government's relations with other States and the challenges posed by internal armed groups and the politics of exclusion they often support. There are, however, some common elements that we could cite as factors which continue to worsen the present situation in the region:

- The lack of democracy and of democratic institutions;
- The immaturity of the political class, poor governance and corruption;
- The non-respect of agreements and of international law;
- Impunity for crimes and political cronyism;
- The desire for natural resources and their plundering by a politico-military elite;
- The absence of national armies capable of ensuring the safety of the populace and the integrity of borders;
- The proliferation and illicit trade of small arms;
- The reinforcement of a culture of identity-related violence;
- The persistence of poverty and overpopulation;
- The ambiguous position of the international community.

Regional Integration: Each of the countries in the sub-region has surely known and has pursued its own process of internal normalisation. Nevertheless, in the Great Lakes region it is clear that the reconciliation process in one country is strongly linked to that of the others. Any viable solution will then have a regional character. It is therefore important that the forthcoming International Conference on the Great Lakes for which the UN is planning serve to speed up the normalisation process between all these states and to define strategies for political and economic integration of the region. The resumption of activities of the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries (ECGAL) would be a vital step. Other institutions of a social, cultural and scientific nature can also contribute to deepening the progress of recent years.

Establishing the Rule of Law: This implies the democratisation of power, good governance, respect for human rights and the end of impunity at every level through the creation of courts and tribunals. Efforts can be made to set up real Truth and Reconciliation commissions. In addition, the foundation of an International Criminal Tribunal for the Great Lakes appears indispensable to the process toward reconciliation and a sustainable peace.

Cohabitation and Border Security: Building a sustainable peace must also be based on political cohabitation and cooperation for regional security. The security of borders must be guaranteed and checkpoints ensured in common. To reach these objectives, it is necessary to strengthen the capacities of republican armies in every country in the region and to strengthen measures for checking small arms trafficking at the borders.

Strengthening civil society: In any process of restructuring a State, the presence and revitalisation of institutions of civil society are indispensable. These organisations have an important role to play in the process of reform and regional integration. Far from being antagonists that place themselves in opposition to public authorities, they must rather be viewed as partners in the peaceful and democratic transformation of the region. In addition, members of civil society are well situated to collaborate in campaigns to educate and raise awareness of the challenges that continue to block the process toward peace.

Pax Christi International therefore requests this Commission to adopt a resolution that includes an appeal to the International Community, and more particularly to the UN, to:

1. Rigorously pursue efforts to accompany the process of national pacification in each country and the process of the normalisation of relations between every State in the sub-region;
2. Put in place common cross-border structures to maintain border security and to eradicate the illicit trade of small arms;
3. Step up efforts and support the capacities of MONUC to accomplish its task of ensuring the security of the DR Congo, disarm armed groups and complete its programme of Disarmament, Demobilisation, Repatriation, Resettlement and Reintegration (DDRRR) of ethnic militias;
4. Strengthen the capacities of the African Force in Burundi;
5. Support action to demobilise child soldiers and ensure their integration into society;
6. Give greater attention to the numerous acts of violence perpetrated against women;
7. Seek solutions for putting an end to the illicit trade of diamonds, coltan and other natural resources, a trade that feeds the conflicts in the eastern DRC;
8. Strengthen mechanisms for closely accompanying every country in preparations for elections, in the Truth and Reconciliation process and in the reestablishment of juridical systems;
9. Create an International Criminal Tribunal for the Great Lakes;
10. Increase development aid to countries on the condition that they practice good governance, they devote these funds to poverty reduction and they respect peace agreements and the norms of international law.

Pax Christi International also requests that States in the Great Lakes region to:

Make a deep commitment to respect the fundamental rights of the person:

1. Actively promote a national commitment to human dignity, to the rights of the individual, to tolerance and to reconciliation between groups within each country;
2. Open wide the political space that includes an autonomous press and the reinforcement of a free, independent and participative civil society in the public interest;
3. Completely reform and promote national programmes on civic and political education directed toward civil and military leadership and toward the general public in view of promoting responsible leadership and a culture of non-violence;

Give then priority to the establishment of the rule of law:

4. Strengthen peaceful coexistence between themselves by respecting the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of neighbouring countries;
5. Strictly respect and fulfil completely every commitment taken in the framework of peace accords that have been signed consensually between each State and its rebel groups;
6. Accelerate the demobilisation process of armed groups and of the cantonment of soldiers, giving particular attention to the demobilisation of child soldiers as well as their integration back into society;
7. Integrate into national armies all combatant forces and armed groups in accordance with objective criteria and establish in each State a truly republican army that is capable of protecting the entire populace and not just one part of it;

Energetically pursue efforts toward a programme of regional integration:

8. Establish regional mechanisms for integration, reconciliation and cooperation in the political, economic, social, cultural and military spheres.
