

For Immediate Release:

DR Congo: End Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources *Government must act on Parliamentary Commission's Recommendations*

(London, February 21, 2006) - The government of the Democratic Republic of Congo must act promptly on the recommendations of a Congolese parliamentary investigation that uncovered illegal natural resource exploitation and profiteering from armed conflict, said a leading group of international human rights, environmental and aid organizations today.

In June 2005 the Lutundula Commission, a special National Assembly commission led by parliamentarian Christophe Lutundula, submitted a report on its investigations into mining and other business contracts that rebels and government authorities signed between 1996 and 2003, when Congo was wracked by war. The report found that dozens of contracts are either illegal or of limited value for the development of the country and it recommends their termination or renegotiation. It further recommends judicial action against a number of senior political and corporate actors involved in these operations.

After eight months of delay, the office of the National Assembly headed by Olivier Kamitatu decided last week to distribute the report to all parliamentarians, though no decision was made on when it would be officially examined by the chamber. Local sources reported the delay was due to pressure by senior politicians named in the report and leading figures of some of the main political parties who wished to bury it before elections scheduled for May. Discussion of the commission's report by the National Assembly has already been postponed twice and due to a heavy parliamentary agenda, risks being further delayed.

"For years, Congo's politicians have struck deals that enrich themselves but provide no benefit to the Congolese public. Profits from such deals have often come at the cost of enormous suffering and loss of human lives," said the coalition of non-governmental organizations. "Parliament must scrutinize the Lutundula Commission's findings and hold political actors accountable before the elections."

Since the start of the transitional government in June 2003, armed groups linked to neighboring countries and corrupt Congolese government officials have continued illicit economic exploitation in the country. Last month, a United Nations arms monitoring group reported to the Security Council that the competition for control of natural resources continues to fuel the violent conflict in eastern and southern Congo.

The Lutundula Commission report draws attention to the ongoing illegal exploitation and recommends an immediate moratorium on the signing of new contracts until after the elections. To ensure continued parliamentary scrutiny, it also calls for an expansion of its mandate to investigate contracts signed during the transitional period from June 2003 to present. These recommendations, made eight months ago, were ignored. Meanwhile, political and corporate actors have concluded new mining deals with minimal oversight.

While carrying out the investigation, some members of the commission were threatened and they found politicians, officials, and company executives unwilling to answer questions. Despite support from the World Bank for the commission's work, a number of countries and international organizations also refused to assist the commission. Officials from the United Nations and the Belgian Senate, both of which had investigated natural resource extraction in

the Congo between 2000 and 2003, withheld important information regarding some of the illegal deals, citing concerns over confidentiality.

In its report, the commission corroborates the central findings of the U.N. Panel of Experts and other investigations, which concluded that belligerents were motivated in part by their desire to exploit Congo's mineral and economic wealth. Belligerents used some of their profits to finance further military operations that often involved widespread human rights abuses against civilians and violations of international humanitarian law. The war is estimated to have caused the deaths of four million people in Congo, the highest death toll in terms of civilian lives since World War II.

Set up by the peace accords of 2003, the Lutundula Commission includes representatives of all the major parties to the conflict. The commission assessed the legality of deals entered into by the former belligerents and their possible benefits for the nation. In its first report, the commission recommends that 16 contracts be ended or renegotiated and that 28 Congolese and international companies be investigated for violations of Congolese law. The commission also recommends that 17 persons be prosecuted for fraud, theft and other charges. A second report detailing the financial costs of the war is soon to be submitted by the commission.

“When the peace accords were signed, all parties agreed to investigate these deals. Now that the commission has found proof of corruption and abuses, Congolese leaders must squarely address the problem,” said the coalition of international NGOs. “Parliament must promptly put the commission's report on its agenda and take action on its recommendations before the end of the transition period.”

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The preliminary Lutundula Commission report can be found at <http://www.freewebs.com/congo-kinshasa/>

The group of international and Congolese human rights, environmental and aid organizations

includes: Global Witness; Human Rights Watch; Rights and Accountability in Development (RAID); International Crisis Group (ICG); Fatal Transactions; Friends of the Earth-USA; Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa (NiZA); The Rainforest Foundation UK; Broederlijk Delen; Association Africaine de Droit de l'Homme (ASADHO-Katanga); Centre National D'Appui Au Developpement et à la Participation Populaire (CENADEP); Groupe d'Appui Aux Exploitants des Ressources Naturelles (GAERN); Nouvelle Dynamique Syndicale (NDS); Organisation Concertée des Ecologistes et Amis de la Nature (OCEAN).