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June 9, 2011

Honorable Hillary Clinton  
Secretary of State  
U.S. State Department  
2201 C. Street  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

As Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and President of Catholic Relief Services (CRS), we strongly recommend that you appoint a Special Envoy to the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa. We do so out of deep concern for the suffering that the people of the Eastern Congo continue to endure. Strong United States leadership is essential to defend human life and dignity, achieve a lasting peace, and realize the peoples' aspirations for authentic human development.

The USCCB and CRS have been active in solidarity with the Catholic Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the other countries of the Great Lakes region for many years. Delegations of Catholic leaders have traveled between our two countries with some regularity to address the crisis. CRS has ongoing programs in the region and has seen firsthand the devastating impact on the lives of millions of people, especially women and children, from repeated outbreaks of violence, systematic rape, and rampant looting of natural resources. Numerous militia groups, both large and small, perpetrate atrocities in almost total impunity.

The government of the DRC has been unable to both stop the violence and establish effective, transparent and accountable governance. Government services are almost non-existent, and the region's infrastructure, never well developed, has yet to recover from two major wars. The DRC armed forces are accused of violating the human rights of the very people they are charged to protect, and are active participants in the illegal exploitation of Congo's natural resources.

The situation in the DRC does not exist in a vacuum. Ethnic rivalries and conflicts over land and mineral resources have plagued Congo and the other Great Lakes countries for decades. These factors were aggravated in the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda. Neighboring countries, especially Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi, must contribute to a resolution of the problems plaguing eastern Congo, particularly conflicts over mineral resources and violence by armed groups with foreign links.

We recognize the important contributions that the U.S. government has made and we appreciate its support for the activities of CRS. The United States is the largest single contributor to the U.N. peacekeeping operation (MONUSCO). Our nation has provided important funding for

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humanitarian activities, assistance to survivors, prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, stabilization intervention, security sector reform, and development activities.

However, the scope, complexity and interconnection of the many factors contributing to the long-running crisis require the United States to exercise greater leadership, beginning with the establishment of a comprehensive strategy for the Great Lakes region. The strategy must be backed up with an increased commitment of resources. Only with such a strategy and its rigorous implementation will it be possible to reduce the violence and suffering. We believe that the formulation of the strategy, and more importantly, its implementation, require a Special Envoy to ensure unity of purpose, adequate authority, effective coordination with international organizations and other donor governments active in the region, and constant oversight.

A new Special Envoy with a broad mandate supported by the highest levels at the State Department will need a substantial multi-disciplinary staff. The special envoy's authority should extend beyond the DRC to the entire Great Lakes region to enable effective international action, especially related to implementation the Congo Conflict Minerals legislation and mineral sector reforms more widely, and to dismantling armed groups, including the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), as required by the recent LRA legislation.

The Special Envoy's charge should include attention to the upcoming elections. In a recent statement the Catholic bishops of the DRC emphasized the importance of the electoral process "on which the future of the Congolese nation depends." The bishops urge a free, fair and participatory process not tainted by corrupt practices and free of all forms of violence. We join in their call for the international community to provide logistical support and independent international observers, and urge the U.S. government to contribute its fair share to this effort.

In Sudan, the world has witnessed the positive impact that a robust U.S. Government engagement can have on an intractable conflict. In solidarity with the bishops of the DRC and Great Lakes region, we urge the United States to show this same level of engagement and leadership there. As a major international presence in the region and a beneficiary of the minerals that flow out of the DRC, our nation has a special moral responsibility to help protect the lives, dignity and future of our Congolese brothers and sisters.

Sincerely yours,

Most Reverend Howard J. Hubbard  
Bishop of Albany  
Chairman  
Committee on International Justice and Peace

Ken Hackett  
President  
Catholic Relief Services