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For immediate release

Press release

Tuesday October 21, 2008

Kampala –Human rights and civil society activists meeting on the margins of the historic first tripartite summit of the Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA), East African Community (EAC), and Southern African Development Community (SADC) in Kampala, have asked the three regional bodies to harmonize their work, promote economic justice and ensure early warning and prevention of humanitarian and human rights abuses in their respective geographical areas.

These asks were contained in a Communiqué issued to the three regional economic communities on Tuesday ahead of the summit (see below pasted).

Hosted by the East African Law Society and the International Refugee Rights Initiative, the meeting was attended by over fifty civil society activists from Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Zambia.

“The RECs can play a vital role in both promoting economic justice and peace in the region but there needs to be harmonisation of membership and a renewed commitment to implementing the REC treaties”, said Dismas Nkunda, a spokesman for the group. “Despite the presence of an extensive framework of laws providing for the exercise of fundamental freedoms and rights in the three regional blocks, the lack of implementation of these agreements has left many in the region in limbo”.

The Communiqué specifically asked the Heads of State to make priority of the situations in Zimbabwe, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, some of the never ending hot spots of conflict, using the principles in the frameworks of the sub-regional groupings which guarantee rights protection.

The activists also asked the three regional economic communities to operate with greater transparency with respect to their decision making processes and to respect and enforce decisions of the sub-regional courts, including guaranteeing their independence.

Ends

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Communiqué of civil society meeting on the margins of the EAC, COMESA and SADC Tripartite Summit

18 October 2008
Kampala

On the occasion of the historic Tripartite Summit, bringing together the Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA), East African Community (EAC), and Southern African Development Community (SADC) in Kampala, Uganda, we the civil society representatives from the countries of the three regional economic communities (RECs), came together to discuss the role of the RECs as the building blocks of African integration and development and as key elements in the architecture of regional and international peace, justice, governance and security, and called on the member States of COMESA, EAC and SADC, working through their regional groupings, to:

- Encourage greater participation of civil society in organs, institutions and programmes of the RECs, in accordance with the provisions of the respective REC treaties, and, where appropriate, through the development of additional legal and procedural frameworks for more participatory engagement;
- Operationalise existing mechanisms within the RECs to encourage greater transparency and information flow with respect to decision making, in addition to greater consultation and engagement with civil society;
- Develop mechanisms to ensure implementation of decisions taken within the RECs including the consideration of revisions to REC treaties to include benchmarks and timeframes for the achievement of regional integration programmes and processes;
- Expeditiously identify a process to rationalize the RECs in accordance with the Abuja Treaty in order to facilitate deeper and more effective exercise of REC membership;
- Consider, as part of the process of greater integration, closer collaboration with the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, a model framework for integration and cooperation at the service of human rights, security and development;
- Ensure respect for, and enforcement of, decisions of sub-regional courts, and guarantee their independence;
- Adopt practical and effective mechanisms for the enforcement of sanctions within the REC frameworks;
- Ensure that the development by the RECs of new legal frameworks around HIV and AIDS takes into account the need to harmonise standards and policies across borders so as to facilitate free movement and access to essential services and commodities within the region and does not further stigmatise those affected by or at risk of HIV and AIDS;
- Implement policies to encourage people-centred citizenship which recognises and takes into account the realities of regional conceptions of identity and belonging;
- Ensure respect for existing obligations, at international, regional and sub-regional levels, for the effective protection of internally displaced persons, refugees and stateless persons, as essential for the prevention of conflict;

- Effectively operationalise the existing REC legal instruments pertaining to freedom of movement of persons, services and goods, and associated rights of residence and establishment;
- Acknowledge that current negotiations through the REC frameworks around the Economic Partnership Agreements have the potential to undermine the sustainable development of the RECs and undertake to ensure both that achieving economic justice is a governing principle, and that the people of the region are involved, in the negotiations;
- Ensure that all three RECs operationalise the norms and procedures set out in their respective instruments to ensure implementation of the principle of the responsibility to protect, including early warning, prevention and response mechanisms. This is particularly urgent with respect to the current serious humanitarian and human rights crises in Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe.
