Statement on the Abduction of Ms. Margaret Schenkel in Darfur

Geneva, Monday, 09 October 2017

The Darfur Relief and Documentation Centre (DRDC) received information that on Saturday, 7 October 2017, pro-government militiamen abducted Ms. Margaret Schenkel at gunpoint in her home in El-Fashir, capital of North Darfur State and took her to an unknown location. Ms. Schenkel, a Swiss national in her 70s, has been living and working as a volunteer relief worker in Darfur for about two decades during which she rendered immeasurable humanitarian service to the war victims and other poor people of the region, especially assisting malnourished children and their vulnerable families. Ms. Schenkel runs a therapeutic feeding centre for acutely malnourished children and closely collaborates with the health authorities in North Darfur State and officials at El-Fashir teaching hospital.

Authentic local sources confirmed to DRDC that the militiamen that abducted Ms. Schenkel are under the command of a notorious militia leader who is currently serving within the ranks of the government of North Darfur State’s. The abductors are recently disgruntled by the government delay of their monthly pay.

Abduction of relief workers in Darfur and the threats to their liberty and safety and personal integrity have been a regular practice in armed conflict-affected areas of Sudan in recent years. Over 20 foreign relief workers had been kidnapped, often for ransom money or to force them out of the country, since the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant against President Omar Al-Bashir in March 2009 and the government decision to expel the major international relief agencies from the country. All the humanitarian abductees have been released unharmed after intervention of the government of Sudan. In early May 2017, a French man Mr. Thierry Frezier was released from captivity in Darfur following intervention of the Sudanese authorities. He was abducted by militiamen in Goez Beida in Eastern Chad in March 2017 and forced to cross the international borders to be held in Kutum area in North Darfur State. In all previous cases of abductions and threats, no punitive measures were taken by the Government of Sudan against the abductors.

DRDC strongly condemns the abduction of Ms. Schenkel and calls for her immediate and unconditional release. Furthermore, DRDC holds the government of Sudan responsible for the safety, personal integrity and well-being of Ms. Schenkel and demands that all persons involved in this crime be apprehended and brought to justice. Dismantling of government-controlled militia groups in Darfur should be a priority as they represent an imminent danger to the civilian population and to relief workers in Darfur. Such risks are growing day by day, especially following the untimely decision to withdraw the United Nations and African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) from the region. Ends.