

Interview with John Zigira: Commissioner of the Rwandan Demobilization and Reintegration Commission

N&N No. 9 - July 17, 2007

Can you give us a quick background on the Rwandan Demobilization and Reintegration Commission and its work?

The first stage of the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (RDRC) started in January 1997 as an autonomous Government Commission to manage and implement the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Program (RDRP) for ex-combatants from armed groups (AGs), *Forces Armées Rwandaises* (FAR) and Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF). The second stage, supported by the Multi-country Demobilization and Reintegration Program (MDRP), the World Bank and other bilateral donors started in 2002. The RDRC implements the RDRP and works to ensure that demobilized ex-combatants are successfully socially and economically reintegrated into their communities of return.



How aware are the people of Rwanda of the Commission? Do they support its mission and activities?

We have sensitized the people of Rwanda on RDRC's mission and activities through radio, print media and meetings of local leaders with community members. RDRC/P has 30 District Reintegration Offices that support the sensitization process. An average of 200 ex-AGs, 435 ex-FAR and 1,300 ex-RDF have been demobilized and reintegrated in every district; the ex-combatants relate well with community members.

Local leaders facilitate the ex-combatants' participation in Government programs, including *Gacaca* [a local justice system being used to address genocide crimes by individuals] and health insurance. They can access soft loans from banks to improve their projects like other Rwandans. Community members have accepted the ex-combatants as part of their community.



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Rwanda just recently commemorated the 1994 genocide. How does the Commission's work fit into the context of long term peace building and reconciliation?

The Commission's overall goal is to reconcile Rwandans and contribute to peace in the Great Lakes Region. After demobilization, former soldiers are educated in the history of their country, including the 1994 genocide and its consequences, and on the importance of unity and reconciliation. They are informed of existing government programs and trained to design and manage projects. Program benefits are non-discriminatory – reintegration grants are given to all categories of ex-combatants, including former adversaries. All this is done to facilitate reintegration, reconciliation, sustainable peace and development.

How do you see the Commission's work changing over time? What are activities you no longer need to carry out? What others will need to be started or scaled up?

Originally, the Commission was established, in the spirit of Arusha Peace Accord, to support the reinsertion of ex-FAR who remained in Rwanda after the 1994 genocide, and to demobilize and reintegrate those eligible soldiers from the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA). In 2002, the program was extended to include members of [Rwandan] armed groups [based in other countries] and Rwandan Defense Forces.

Today, the demobilization target of ex-FAR and RDF has been achieved. The Commission is now focusing on additional reintegration of ex-combatants, scaling up of vocational training and apprenticeships, and additional support to mixed associations of both ex-combatants and civilians. There are other projects to be started, including literacy education for demobilized ex-combatants and psychosocial support to those with trauma or mental issues. The Commission is also focusing on sensitizing local authorities and NGOs to assist in the reintegration process.

What are the most challenging aspects of the Commission's work and why?

The most challenging aspect is the protracted repatriation of members of armed groups [located outside Rwanda]. The program has a term limit and we are not sure whether the expected target of about 9,500 armed group members will have returned [by that time]. AG members and other refugees are kept hostage by their leaders, guilty of genocide crimes, who misinform them about life today in Rwanda and threaten to kill whomever is found escaping.

Poverty is also a challenge that hinders reintegration, especially for those who don't own land or live upcountry. And reintegration of physically disabled ex-combatants can be difficult, as most of them have low levels of education, further limiting their chances for employment.

What do you feel are the main lessons the Commission has learned that would be useful for neighboring countries engaged in similar activities?

We have had many ex-combatants succeed in agriculture, including crop farming and animal rearing, commerce and artisanship. These are people who have properly used their reintegration grant and seen economic success because they were sensitized and trained in Demobilization Centers to deal with life challenges before returning to their communities. RDRP staff and Commission members also make follow-up visits and provide both training and advice to the ex-combatants in their communities of return.



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The pooling together of resources through associations in which community members are also involved enables ex-combatants to accelerate their economic and social reintegration. Associations include ‘car parking management’ business in main cities and towns, and town sanitation services, among others. Perhaps neighboring countries can learn a few things from our experience.

How does your participation in the MDRP partnership and the regionality of the MDRP facilitate your work?

Our partnership with MDRP has facilitated our work in many ways. Through MDRP, there is efficient coordination of MDRP activities in the region. Member countries are able to learn from one another and MDRP also helps us to interact and share information with neighboring countries through meetings. The Commission gets concrete information about the presence of armed groups through the MDRP staff. Some of the staff have even participated in encouraging members of armed groups to repatriate. The MDRP website has also played a vital role in sensitization of donors and relevant partners to support our program.

What have you found to be the most personally satisfying about your work?

I have learned a lot about the nature of conflicts in the region and I am happy to be contributing, along with others, to the peace process in the region. It is also gratifying to see an ex-combatant starting with little financial support and building his or her economic success through personal commitment and hard work. There are many such cases in Rwanda.

Since you started your work, what have you seen change for the better in Rwanda? What has not improved enough?

A lot has changed for the better. The insurgency in the north of the country is now history. There is peace and security in each and every district of Rwanda. Most people, including former combatants, are improving their social and economic status. More schools and colleges [have] registered, and [there has been] improved infrastructure and more investments in business and agriculture.

What are your hopes for Rwanda in the next decade? In the long term?

Rwanda has the popular “Vision 2020” that aims to improve the socio-economic situation of all Rwandans by 2020. My hopes are that poverty reduction strategies outlined in the vision are realized and that all members of Rwandan armed groups in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) shall have returned and be contributing to this vision in the next decade. The demobilization and reintegration of former adversaries from the DRC and other neighboring countries is a major contribution by RDRC towards durable peace and stability. I am hopeful that reconciliation and everlasting peace shall be realized in the long term.

- With many thanks to Commissioner Zigira and John Rusimbi of the RDRC

For more information on MDRP, please visit www.mdrp.org or contact Bruno Donat, Communications Officer, MDRP Secretariat, World Bank at info@mdrp.org.