

African Development Bank pledges US\$23 million for demobilizing soldiers in Africa

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PARIS (AP) - The African Development Bank has committed US\$23 million (euro15.5 million) to a program aimed at demobilizing thousands of former soldiers -- including child combatants -- in central Africa's troubled Great Lakes region, bank officials said Wednesday.

The funds are to be used to provide soldiers who hand over their arms with the kinds of basic vocational training, counseling and financial support necessary to reintegrate them into civilian life, said the African Development Bank's Ginette Nzau-Muteta.

The money will help cover a shortfall in the World Bank's Multi-Country **Demobilization and Reintegration** Program, which targets more than 400,000 ex-combatants in seven central African nations, she said.

But even with the pledge, the program, which kicked off in 2002 and is slated to run through 2008, is still facing a shortfall of about US\$24 million (euro16 million), said Ingo Wiederhofer, a World Bank official.

Wiederhofer helps oversee the program's operations in Rwanda, which is still recovering from a 1994 genocide that killed more than half a million members of the country's Tutsi ethnic minority and politically moderate ethnic Hutus.

More than 26,000 former combatants -- including regular soldiers as well as members of armed groups who fled the country after the genocide -- have been demobilized, according to World Bank statistics.

"The government reasons that it's better to have these people inside the country working for development than outside creating instability," Wiederhofer said. "It's a courageous stance."

Some 600 child soldiers are among those who have given up their arms in Rwanda, Wiederhofer said.

Under the program, the former child combatants spend two to three months at a site in the east of the country where they receive health care, basic education and counseling.

Demobilized adults spend about two months at a separate site in Rwanda, where they undergo health and psychological treatment and training in basic business skills. Upon leaving, most get a lump sum ranging from about US\$300-US\$500 (euro200-euro340) in cash, to be used as seed money to start a small business, Wiederhofer said.

In Rwanda, the program's success rate is "pretty high," he said. "At the end, most are at the same or better level (economically) than their peers in the same community."

Per-capita gross national income in Rwanda is about US\$250 (euro170), according to World Bank statistics.

Maria Correia, the overall director for the program, said continuing political instability -- particularly in Burundi and Congo -- is the biggest challenge, but pointed to the numbers of those disarmed as evidence of the program's success.

She said some 300,000 of a targeted 413,000 soldiers have been demobilized since 2002 in program's seven countries: Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda.

The program's advisory committee, made up of donor countries, international agencies and affected countries, regularly reviews the issue. Talks in Paris last through Thursday.