



RWANDA: Turning ex-child soldiers into able citizens



Photo: Aimable Twahirwa/IRIN

Evariste Nzamurambaho, a former FDLR child soldier who has undergone vocational training

KIGALI, 30 September 2008 (IRIN) - Evariste Nzamurambaho, recruited into the Forces démocratiques pour la libération du Rwanda (FDLR) militia at the age of 12, is still haunted by the experience.

"Being recruited as a child soldier was horrible," he said. "I regret having been trained to kill."

Nzamurambaho is one of 45 former child-soldiers to have completed a six-month vocational course in electronics at a youth centre in Gacuriro, in the Rwandan capital, Kigali.

The FDLR, a Hutu armed group founded by fugitive perpetrators of Rwanda's 1994 genocide, recruited him from a refugee camp in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

"When we were fighting in the DRC, our commanders used to tell us that none of our former neighbours had survived," he explained. "I think I have a promising future because I have been transformed into a different person."

Nzamurambaho is, however, apprehensive about his chances of getting a job and being reintegrated into his old community.

He is not alone. According to UN estimates, tens of thousands of children have been abducted and forcibly recruited into various armed groups in eastern DRC, among them Rwandans whose parents fled to Congo after the 1994 genocide.

Few employment opportunities mean the former child soldiers sometimes lack food and shelter, according to a local NGO advocating for children and women's rights, Haguruka.

"They should be given preferential treatment on the basis of their age and their lack of jobs," said Zaina Nyiramata, executive secretary of Haguruka.

Skills factor

The situation is not unique to former child soldiers but also pertains to older demobilised combatants. "There are few enterprises to occupy them," Jean Sayinzoga, chairman of the Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission (RDRC), told IRIN.

"There is a need for more socio-economic support for the demobilised," Sayinzoga said. The low education level of most of the ex-combatants was another challenge.

"When they don't have skills to get a job it is difficult to reintegrate," he said. "When a military person is not integrated it can also be very dangerous. We are trying to give those without higher education some skills through apprenticeship programmes in tailoring and mechanics."

A few have rejoined formal education.

Meanwhile, the government is conducting a sensitisation campaign to make reintegration easier. "Initially when we started to send ex-combatants back home they were rejected," Sayinzoga added.

According to the Minister of Labour, Anastase Murekezi, vocational training makes reintegration easier. "It helps rebuild their lives while contributing to rehabilitation."

But the **slow repatriation** of Rwandan armed groups from neighbouring countries remains a challenge, despite the use of local media by the RDRC to encourage repatriation.



Photo: IRIN

Former child soldiers: The UN estimates that tens of thousands of children have been abducted and forcibly recruited into various armed groups in eastern Congo, among them Rwandans whose parents fled to Congo after the 1994 genocide

Thousands demobilised

Since 1997, at least 62,000 former army and militia ex-combatants have been demobilised, including Rwanda Defence Force (formerly Rwandan Patriotic Army) members, ex-FAR (Forces armées rwandaises), the national army before the 1994 genocide, as well as ex-FDLR militia, according to Sayinzoga.

About 125 FDLR (the main remaining active Rwandan militia group in eastern DRC) ex-combatants are awaiting demobilisation at the transit camp in Mutobo in the Northern Province.

Upon arrival at Mutobo they will go through a verification and registration exercise before receiving 10 weeks of basic skills training in agriculture, health, including HIV/AIDS awareness, as well as reading and writing. They are also issued with a basic-needs kit equivalent to 50,000 RFW (US\$93).

“When a military person is not integrated it can also be very dangerous”

"Some have psychosocial trauma and are given counselling," Sayinzoga said. Child ex-combatants are screened and separated from adult ex-combatants for special rehabilitation before reunification with families.

After reintegration, the demobilised are given access to land where available in addition to receiving a grant of 100,000 RFW (\$186) six months after demobilisation. A recognition of service allowance is also paid within three months after discharge to former soldiers.

According to official data, the first stage of the demobilisation and reintegration programme from 1997 to 2001 demobilised 18,692 RPA members, of whom 2,364 were children.

This DDR phase will end in December and the third phase runs from 2009 to 2011.

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