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Democratic Republic of the Congo: Demobilization of Rwandan Soldiers Going Slowly

The United Nations, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda are using a combination of carrots and sticks to convince members of militia groups in the eastern DRC to lay down their arms. The program is working, but the demobilization is slow. Several changes could make the effort more effective.

There is an urgent need to disarm fighters in the DRC. A thousand people a day are dying of conflict related causes in the eastern Congo, where warring militias have been causing death and destruction for nearly a decade. Success of an international effort to disarm and demobilize the militias, including insurgent groups from Rwanda and Uganda, is a key element in efforts to bring democracy to the DRC and more stability to the Great Lakes region.

Officials with the United Nations peacekeeping force in the Congo, known as MONUC, estimate that there are 200,000 armed fighters in the DRC. Most of them are members of the DRC army, but there are about 10,000-12,000 foreign fighters in the eastern Congo. The DRC and the UN have launched a program to cut the number of people under arms in half, with all of them serving in the DRC army. The program involves paying Congolese troops to demobilize and convincing foreign fighters to disarm and return home.

A key determinant of whether peace and stability will come to the region will be the demobilization of FDLR, or *Forces Democratique de Liberation du Rwanda*. This largely Hutu group fled Rwanda after the 1994 genocide, which they helped execute, to seek sanctuary in the DRC. Rwandan forces have invaded the DRC twice, in 1996 and 1998, in part to suppress the FDLR and made other incursions since then. The DRC wants the foreign fighters out because, as unpaid troops, they survive by intimidation and theft. "They use the AK-47 as a credit card," a MONUC official says, referring to the weapons they carry. In addition, Rwanda wants the FDLR to demobilize so the insurgents will no longer pose a threat, however weak, to the government in Kigali.

Last March FDLR leaders meeting in Rome said that they would lay down their arms and return to Rwanda. They also condemned the 1994 genocide and renounced the

use of force against Kigali. Despite the pledge, the repatriation of FDLR troops has been slow, and FDLR units continue to occupy villages and appropriate food and other goods in the DRC. "On both sides of the border, we are ready to take these people home, and we're just waiting for them to come," William Swing, the UN's special representative in the DRC, said in a recent interview. Both MONUC and Rwanda are prepared to process a flood of about 45,000 former fighters and their families, but they are getting a trickle.

The plan to get the FDLR out of the eastern Congo has two parts. First, the Congolese army is attacking FDLR units in an effort to force them to surrender to UN peacekeepers. Second, Rwanda is offering hefty payments to insurgents who lay down their arms and repatriate. However, many Hutu fighters in the DRC fear that they will have to face the peoples' courts that are holding people accountable for genocide when they return, and some of the FDLR leaders fear that they will be tried as war criminals in Arusha, Tanzania, where an international court is hearing charges of genocide.

"We believe that the majority of foreign armed groups wish to go home. I'm talking basically about Rwandans," Mr. Swing said. "They've been out in the wilderness for about 11 years. They are eager to go back, but they cannot easily return for the simple reason that when they approach MONUC Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement Centers, they put their lives at risk because the hard-line commanders don't want them to return. [The leaders] know they will have to go to trial at the international court in Arusha, so that's a big obstacle."

For its part, Rwanda offers a generous package of support to FDLR members who demobilize and return to Rwanda. Former combatants get a total of \$300—about \$50 more than Rwanda's annual per capita income—

within six months of return to help them build a house or set up a business. They also receive 60 days of education in everything from Rwandan laws to the mechanics of setting up and running a business. "When I left the Congo, I was broken," said an ex-combatant at the Mutobo Center, where Rwandan officials have prepared over 1,500 former fighters for return to their villages. "When I got here they treated me well." The World Bank and European donors fund the program.

Ex-combatants say that it is difficult to escape from their units in the DRC. First, FDLR leaders spread rumors that Hutus returning to Rwanda will be killed. Both MONUC and demobilized soldiers say that Rwanda needs to be more aggressive, through radio and other means, at defusing these rumors. Second, FDLR leaders actively block soldiers from defecting. "When I decided that I was going to Rwanda, they shot me," said a 47 year old man on crutches.

But the former combatants and Rwandan officials are scathing about MONUC, saying that the UN force is not well organized to accept fleeing FDLR soldiers. "MONUC doesn't go to meet us; we have to go there," one said. Partially for this reason, child soldiers, especially girls, find escape daunting, so the repatriation of child soldiers is very slight. Several former adult fighters said that when they reached MONUC outposts, they sometimes had to wait hours or even days before they were welcomed and protected by MONUC. Although MONUC has established a network of agents in Congolese villages to encourage defections, few of the agents speak Kinyarwanda, the native tongue of Hutu fighters.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

The United Nations

- ❑ Enact travel and other sanctions against FDLR leaders, some of whom travel and live outside of Africa. (The FDLR website is based in Germany).

MONUC

- ❑ Reach out more effectively to defecting militia members, in particular by deploying more Kinyarwanda speakers in the DRC.

The Government of Rwanda

- ❑ Work with MONUC to find more effective ways to counter rumors that are discouraging FDLR members from defecting.
- ❑ Use radio and other means more effectively to highlight the money and support returning ex-combatants receive.

RI president Ken Bacon recently returned from Rwanda and the DRC.