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Uganda: Lack of funding stalls ex-combatants' reintegration

A Ugandan government programme to reintegrate more than 26,000 former armed rebels has stalled as a result of poor funding, leaving thousands of ex-combatants with few means of earning a living.

Just 5,335 out of 26,288 ex-combatants - mainly former Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) fighters - who renounced and abandoned rebellion had been reintegrated into their communities as of 14 March 2012, according to statistics from Uganda's amnesty commission. The exercise started in July 2009.

The minister for internal affairs on 25 May 2012 [pulled the plug](#) on controversial legislation which since 2000 had granted blanket amnesty to rebels. However, the minister extended sections of the Amnesty Act relating to reintegration and resettlement of the former combatants for the next 12 months, and extended the commission's mandate for one year.

After receiving an amnesty certificate, each ex-combatant is given a reinsertion package of 263,000 shillings (US\$120), a mattress, a blanket, a hoe, a machete, cups, plates and maize and bean seeds.

Nathan Twinomugisha, principal legal officer with the amnesty commission, told IRIN the commission lacked funds with which to reintegrate members of some 29 armed groups granted blanket amnesty since 2000.

"We are operating on consolidated funds under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The funds allocated to us... are not enough... This is affecting us badly," he told IRIN. "If we don't reintegrate and resettle the former combatants, they will be a problem to the communities they have gone back to."

Twinomugisha said the closure of a World Bank funded Uganda Demobilization and Reintegration Programme in June 2011 had contributed to the slow-down in reintegration. "The close of the project affected our activities so much. This was an \$8.2 million project," he said.

"We are now doing it slowly under the government's Peace, Recovery and Development Programme. We are picking some former rebels and people in the community to train them in agriculture, carpentry, salon work [hairdressing], mechanics and others skills to enable them cope up," Twinomugisha added. "We are giving them some seedlings, pesticides, sprayers and some little money. It's a positive thing for both the returnees and the community. This is the best way to lessen conflict and create peace and

reconciliation.

"Integration is a long process. It needs a personal touch and follow-up. We have to prepare them to ensure the stigma is off and the rebel mindset is rehabilitated. This is in order to help them fit into the community... They can easily re-offend and go back to commit rebellion."

Officials from the commission say the lack of funds means they are unable to facilitate and monitor the demobilization and resettlement as well as promote dialogue and reconciliation, all critical to the reintegration process.

No budget funding

Barney Afako, a Ugandan human rights lawyer involved in the July 2006 peace talks in the South Sudan capital Juba as an adviser to the mediators, said the government must find money to complete the process. "There is need to negotiate and allocate some funds from the national budget to cater for reintegration and resettlement of former combatants," he said.

However, in her 14 June budget Finance Minister Maria Kiwanuka did not allocate any funds for ex-combatants' reintegration.

Florence Amito of Orom, Kitgum District, a former combatant and wife of an LRA commander, told IRIN: "We are suffering. The government must help us. They had promised to give us the resettlement and reintegration package, which is not coming... I can't pay the school fees of my four children I came back with. The government should consider paying their schools fees and also help us with some money for start income-generating activities."

Lucy Lapoti, an advocacy officer for the amnesty commission in Gulu, northern Uganda, said the failure to reintegrate former rebels into their communities meant they were marginalized, with many turning to crime to survive. "We recently conducted a survey in the region to find out the number of former combatants who are inmates in prisons... We couldn't believe that 42 percent of inmates are those from the bush," she said. "They are committing crimes as a result of frustration, being finger-pointed and provoked. Many of them are so aggressive."

Real integration?

Reintegration has been difficult for the ex-combatants, with many being rejected by their communities as murderers; some people in northern Uganda do not think they deserve any support from the government. "The former combatants were given amnesty. They are able bodied. People have to learn to work for themselves. They should exploit the land by farming," said Santo Oketta, coordinator of Kekwaro Acholi, a local cultural institution. "Let them admit that they committed crimes and people have forgiven them. Why should government continue rewarding them? They should appreciate what they have been given."

But according to retired Bishop Baker Ochola, a member of the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants is a priority for transition from war to peace: "The real integration has not taken place in northern Uganda and this is a biggest problem... The combatants were basically just given reinsertion package... This is real injustice and failure on the side of government... Government should come up with a clear policy on reintegration of combatants in the region," he said.

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