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Over 100 demobilized combatants, their wives, and children have died from starvation and disease in a remote military camp in the Democratic Republic of Congo after officials failed to provide adequate food and health care.

Congo's government should urgently move everyone at the camp to a more accessible site, hold those responsible for their mistreatment to account, and encourage greater United Nations involvement in the rehabilitation of former fighters.

"The Congolese government's neglect of these former fighters and their families is criminal," said Ida Sawyer, senior Congo researcher. "Before more people die, the government should immediately move them to a place where they have food and health care and are treated with basic human decency."

In September 2013, 941 surrendered fighters from various armed groups and several hundred family members were sent from eastern Congo to the Kotakoli camp, in a remote part of Equateur province in the country's northwest, to await integration into the military or civilian life. Supplies ran out by the end of the year and for the next nine months the government sent minimal food and medicine. With little to eat and virtually no health care, many former combatants and their family members became ill and died from malnutrition and disease.

Human Rights Watch research at Kotakoli camp in September 2014 found that 42 demobilized combatants and at least 5 women and 57 children had died at the camp since December 2013. Human Rights Watch met with former combatants, their dependents, Congolese army officers overseeing the camp, and members of the local community.

Former fighters told Human Rights Watch that military officials told them they would be held at the camp, a rundown former military commando training center built in 1965, for three months. The former combatants believed that they would then either integrate into the army or take part in

a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program before returning to civilian life. A year later, the government has yet to begin a new "DDR III" program.

Providing provisions to the camp was hindered by the poor state of roads in the area. For each delivery, it could take days for a military truck to drive from the closest town, Gbadolite, to Kotakoli, on a dilapidated 100 kilometer road. A health worker at the camp had almost no supplies or medicine to treat the sick and did not speak the same language as the former combatants, limiting his ability to correctly diagnose illness.

People looked like "the photos of the famine in Somalia and Ethiopia," a 28-year-old former combatant from North Kivu told Human Rights Watch. "We saw people like that here. An adult who is just skin and bones.... We first buried people in the public cemetery. When we saw that the situation was becoming more and more appalling, we started burying them in the [regroupment] center, far from the civilian population. We could bury up to five bodies a day."

Kotakoli camp was guarded but the Congolese army commander in charge allowed the former combatants to go into the village of Kotakoli during the day to try to find food. However, the remoteness of the area - surrounded by dense forests and almost inaccessible by road - meant that there was little means for survival.

During the past year, the government made two payments of about US\$20 to each former combatant, most of which they spent on food. To earn money to pay for necessities, the former fighters sold the mattresses and cookware they had received upon arrival and worked for local families cutting grass, hauling wood, and fetching water. Most were paid between 10 cents and 50 cents a day. They would buy cooked cassava for 10 cents or steal squash and beans from nearby farmers' fields. A wife of a former combatant in the camp told Human Rights Watch that because they had sold their cooking utensils, they sometimes cooked in military helmets.

Several pregnant women had miscarriages because of a lack of food, camp residents told Human Rights Watch. At least one woman died during her pregnancy.

A 44-year-old former combatant said, "People lost so much weight it was like you could see into their stomachs. The children were really like skeletons."

A 28-year-old former fighter and father of two told Human Rights Watch he watched his 9-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son die. "They died because there was no medicine. There was no food and I didn't have the means to find [food] for my family," he said. "I helplessly watched them dying. Can you imagine my pain when I thought about how I was going to bury my children? Until now, when I think of my children, I also feel like dying. These kids in the clinic, they slept on the floor, on the cement. I had nothing to put down for a mat. It's this shirt that I'm wearing, this uniform that I put down on the cement to soften the pain."

A local leader from Kotakoli told Human Rights Watch: "It pains us to see people suffer like animals. And even animals don't suffer like they suffer."

The Congolese government's failure to provide adequate food and health care to the surrendered fighters and their families violates international humanitarian law (the laws of war) and international human rights law. Those held at the Kotakoli camp have been deprived of their rights to life, humane treatment, food, and health, among others.

The government's "Pre-DDR" coordinator, Gen. Delphin Kahimbi, told Human Rights Watch by telephone on September 24 that he was aware of problems at Kotakoli and that some held there had died. He said he had sent a commission to Kotakoli to investigate: "The main problem isn't that the government has abandoned them, but that the government doesn't have the means or the capacity to get the provisions to Kotakoli."

In a meeting in Kinshasa on September 30, Alexandre Luba Ntambo, Congo's vice prime minister and minister of defense and former combatants, told Human Rights Watch that the former combatants and their dependents were held in Kotakoli much longer than expected because of significant delays in the implementation of the new DDR program and the "hesitation of donors" to finance the program.

"The situation is really very bad, and we are aware of this," he said. "We didn't voluntarily choose for these people to go hungry or to see them die, but we had difficulties getting them the basic provisions. The delays in providing provisions made them more vulnerable to sicknesses, especially the children."

Ntambo said the government had decided on August 5 to send the former combatants in Kotakoli to another regroupment site where it would be easier to provide them with basic provisions. But the combatants and their families have not been moved, a delay Ntambo said was caused by a lack of means to transport them.

"Rather than hand-wringing and hiding behind excuses that there is no money or transportation, the government should take urgent action to move those who remain at Kotakoli before more people die," Sawyer said. "The government should never have sent the former combatants and their families to an isolated, difficult-to-reach camp if they couldn't care for them there."

To help rebuild confidence in the DDR program and ensure that basic conditions are met, Human Rights Watch urged the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo, MONUSCO, to take a more active role in the program by acting as guarantor of the process. The mission should provide joint oversight with the government, help ensure respect for human rights, and monitor the use of funds. As part of its civilian protection mandate, MONUSCO should also promptly intervene to help protect those at risk in the Kotakoli camp.

On September 11, the head of MONUSCO, Martin Kobler, visited Kotakoli camp to see the conditions there. However, former combatants said, he was shielded from seeing the realities of their life there.

"The government commission investigating Kotakoli camp should provide a comprehensive, impartial report to the military, which should then investigate and prosecute those responsible for needless deaths in the camp," Sawyer said. "Having the UN peacekeeping mission play a bigger role in demobilizing and reintegrating former fighters would help prevent the repetition of such outrages, and encourage other armed groups that may now be reluctant to surrender."

The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Program

Dozens of armed groups are active in eastern Congo. One of the most abusive groups in recent years was the Rwandan-backed M23, which controlled significant territory in eastern Congo and whose fighters were responsible for numerous war crimes during their 19-month rebellion, between April 2012 and November 2013. As the government and UN forces focused their attention on the M23, other armed groups filled the security vacuum and stepped up their attacks on civilians.

Throughout this period, hundreds of combatants from the M23 and other armed groups surrendered to the government, deciding for various reasons to leave their armed groups and either join the army or go back to civilian life. Among those sent to Kotakoli camp in September 2013 to await implementation of the government's new DDR program were fighters from the M23, Nyatura groups, the People's Alliance for a Free and Sovereign Congo (Alliance du peuple pour un Congo libre et souverain, APCLS), and other Mai Mai groups. Many had previously been held in regroupment sites in South Kivu.

After the defeat of the M23 in November 2013, several thousand fighters from more than 20 armed groups surrendered, either because the reason for their uprising had been addressed with the defeat of the M23 or because they feared military operations. But the surrender rate quickly slowed as former fighters languished in squalid conditions at a regroupment site in Bweremana in North Kivu province. Tired of waiting and receiving mixed messages from the government, many fighters and their leaders returned to the bush. Those who stayed were eventually transferred to regroupment sites in Kamina (Katanga province) and Kitona (Bas Congo province), where conditions were also poor, according to Congolese human rights activists who visited the camps.

Since 2004, the Congolese government and international donors have spent millions of dollars on multiple DDR programs for former combatants. All have had significant problems, including widespread corruption and mismanagement of funds and the lack of long-term, community-level reintegration support. Plans for the government's latest program, known as "DDR III," were finalized on June 17. The new plan appears to be more comprehensive than previous programs. The government has stated that there will be no mass integration into the army, that the former combatants will be screened to ensure that the program does not accept alleged human rights abusers, but instead arrests and prosecutes them, and that those who take part in the program will receive long-term socio-economic support.

The government has said it is still in its "Pre-DDR" phase, with former combatants waiting in regroupment sites like Kotakoli for the formal program to begin. Wrangling continues among the government, donors, and MONUSCO about the program's funding and financial oversight.

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