

# In DRC, armed groups dwindle but still aggravate troubled region

## Repatriators working to bring Hutus back to Rwanda often find a blurry line between refugee and ex-combatant

February 24, 2016 5:00AM ET

*Since 2002, more than 30,000 foreign ex-combatants operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have been repatriated, the majority of them to Rwanda. But while their numbers have been reduced, their impact in the DRC is still substantial, especially on the environment. In Rwanda, reintegration efforts have faced their own challenges. This is the first in a three-part series looking at ex-combatants, the environment and the complexities of repatriation and reintegration. [The second](#) part examines the challenges female ex-combatants face.*

NORD-KIVU, Democratic Republic of the Congo — Several dozen people wait outside the chief's office to attend a meeting on the stealing of crops by armed combatants living in Virunga National Park. It is something that happens “nearly every day” said Eric Mashagiro, the mayor of Rugari, a rural region of about 19,000 people bordering the park, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's east. The main culprits, he said, are the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), living in the park's 3,000 square miles of forest and working in collaboration with local armed groups and ex-combatants, who provide intelligence.

The troubles, he said, began in 1994, after the genocide in neighboring Rwanda, when the government's Rwandan Armed Forces and civilian militias known as *interahamwe* killed 800,000 people, most belonging to Rwanda's Tutsi minority. After the largely Tutsi Rwanda Patriotic Front founded by Rwandans in exile in Uganda captured the Rwandan capital, the Hutu government and many Hutu refugees fled to Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



Ruboneka Issa, left, and Pastor Benoit Shombo.

Lindsey Catino

On a dirt road headed south out of the Nord-Kivu provincial capital, Goma, bikes laden with huge sacks of charcoal head in the opposite direction. Farther along the road, Emmanuel Billay, the Nord-Kivu supervisor for the [Program for Peace and Reconciliation \(PPR\)](#), points to barren grassland. Once, he said, “there were trees over there.” Then the Rwandan refugees came and cut all the trees to make charcoal to sell, said Billay. For a time the place was known as Mugunga refugee camp. After the camp was violently dismantled in 1996 during the First Congo War when a rebel group supported by Rwanda, and led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, invaded Zaire, Hutu rebels and refugees scattered. (As president of Zaire, Kabila renamed the country the Democratic Republic of the Congo.)

Billay, as part of the PPR, has been trying to help them return to Rwanda since 2006, the year the protestant Church of Christ in Congo created the program. They do this through a process called sensitization, or educating Rwandans about the benefits of returning to their country through face-to-face interaction, radio broadcasts and pamphlets — all methods also employed by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO).

But the PPR has something MONUSCO and the Congolese army doesn't, said Billay — the people's trust. There are thousands of protestant churches in Nord- and Sud-Kivu, and the PPR relies on them to reach the Rwandans, many of who belong to the churches or live near communities in which the churches have a

strong presence. In this way, he said, “We can go to places the government can’t go, where MONUSCO can’t go.” The church is seen as neutral. The same cannot be said of the Congolese army and MONUSCO, both of which are fighting the FDLR. MONUSCO’s disarmament, demobilization, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement ([DDRRR](#)) of foreign-armed groups are voluntary. But MONUSCO also has an Intervention Brigade, charged with attacking and forcibly disarming armed groups that do not follow the voluntary process.

The only force the PPR uses is the force of faith. Since 2007 they have facilitated in the repatriation of 25,000 refugees and about 1,550 combatants. Today, because of funding cuts, the organization has only two paid negotiators, known as animateurs, and 30 volunteer sensitizers who provide outreach to the community. Pastor Benoit Shombo is the more active of the animateurs. He has been working in Minova, in Sud-Kivu province, just across the border from Nord-Kivu, for four years. He travels the region’s dusty dirt roads on foot or on a motorbike. He tells the combatants, their dependents and other Rwandan refugees, that Rwanda is now at peace, that ethnicity no longer matters in Rwanda, that they will be safe in Rwanda. In the forest their children do not go to school and they go without medical care. In Rwanda life is better.

Since 2002, about 30,600 foreign ex-combatants operating in the DRC have been repatriated to their homelands, according to MONUSCO. The vast majority, 25,623, belonged to FDLR, the force that absorbed the Hutu groups. Today MONUSCO estimates the number of FDLR in the DRC to be about 2,000, while former FDLR leaders estimate the number to be more like 4,500 or 5,000.



Vestine Zamunkunda, 30, and her family are among those Shombo has been working with for years.

Lindsey Catino

Whatever the number, the mayor of Rugari hasn't noticed much of a difference. There is still looting, there are still rapes, and there are still killings. In early February the FDLR was accused of killing 14 villagers in eastern DRC.

"So even if they are pretending they are taking the FDLR to Rwanda, the same problems remain in the population," said Mashagiro.

Ferdinand Ntamuheza is 25, tall and fit. But he was powerless to do anything when four men armed with Kalashnikovs entered his home in the Rugari community of Ngungu 1 on Dec. 30, 2015. The men stole two large sacks of beans he had just harvested — enough to feed his family for six months — three of his four goats and the equivalent of about \$109 he had just received for his potato harvest. Before they left, he said, the men beat him with wooden sticks. He reported the incident to the village chief. The chief in turn informed the Congolese armed forces, the FARDC. But Ntamuheza said nothing happened.

"The soldiers come and just follow the steps [the FDLR] took," he said. "That's all. They can't pursue them. They can't follow them."

The Congolese army, he said, is scared of the FDLR. Mashagiro agreed, saying, "No one can arrest them. No one can follow them and stop them doing all these things." The Congolese army engages with the FDLR, but its efforts do not necessarily aid villagers, who are often caught in the middle. The government's relationship with the rebels is complex. During the Second Congo War, Kabila supported the Hutu rebels against rebels backed by Rwanda and Uganda. After Kabila was assassinated in 2001, his son, Joseph Kabila, took over. In Ngungu 1, armed combatants steal from the community about twice a month. In July 2015, they stole beans, the equivalent of about \$20 and five goats from Riberata Ayingamiye.

Agriculture production is not the only environmental disturbance combatants cause in the area. In Virunga, armed combatants aid people in three main ways in illegally exploiting land in the park, said park director Emmanuel de Merode. The first, charcoal production, which is illegal in the forest, is worth about \$35 million a year. The second, fishing — 80 percent of which is illegal — is worth over \$40 million a year. He didn't provide a monetary value for the third, land invasions, involving wealthy businesspeople whose ties to armed forces allow them to hold the land illegally and rent it to farmers.

Because what they are doing is illegal, all three pay armed combatants to protect them. Together they "represent an overall turnover of illegal exploitation of natural resources of over \$100 million a year," he said. "It's the most significant source of revenue for the armed groups." Because the park doesn't have the resources to stop it, it is a problem that will take many, many years to resolve, he said.



Ruboneka Issa, center.

Lindsey Catino

Shombo has been working with Vestine Zamunkunda and her husband, Ruboneka Issa, in the village of Muchibwe, outside Minova, for three years.

Zamunkunda was a small child when she went to the DRC with her family in 1994. She is 30 now and the mother of two young children; a third, Judith, died of disease. In the past, when times were tough, Zamunkunda thought about returning to Rwanda. Now, she said, they may go after the harvest. There is little for them here, a single room home with a dirt floor and a leaking roof. She believes what the pastor told her about Rwanda and isn't scared to return.

But Issa told a different story. Although his wife said he left Rwanda in 1994, he maintained that he was not in Rwanda during the genocide and has been living in the DRC since 1980. They also differ on his age. He said he is 66; she said he is 57. He said he was never recruited by the FDLR because he is illiterate. He said he is not interested in returning to Rwanda, but if he were, he knows Shombo would help. "I know the pastor. I know his compound. I know his church," said Issa. "If I decide, I say, 'OK, I want to go.' I will look for him."

And Shombo will deliver him to a collection center, from which Issa will be transferred to those repatriating refugees to Rwanda — or those repatriating ex-combatants. The pastor believes rumors that Issa arrived from Rwanda in 1994, as his wife says, and is a former combatant.

At one of the transit centers where Shombo delivers refugees to be repatriated they have been taught to ask questions that will help determine if a refugee is a combatant. Here the distinction between refugee and combatant is often blurred. A refugee family might be the dependents of a combatant. Even MONUSCO admits that its figures for combatants usually include the combatants' dependents. And while convincing refugees to repatriate is one thing, combatants, who can risk death if caught defecting by the FDLR and possible prosecution in Rwanda if they participated in significant crimes during the genocide, are another story.

Last month three of the 60 or so people received at the National Commission for Refugees transit center in Kalungu Village near Minova admitted to being combatants. Social agent Ferdinand Bushu handed them over to MONUSCO to be repatriated to Rwanda as ex-combatants.

Ex-combatants typically spend about three days at the DDRRR camp outside Goma or another camp before being repatriated to their country of origin or transferred to the Congolese army or an organization that deals with child soldiers, depending on their background.

MONUSCO said combatants must be cleared by Congo's national intelligence, which lets them know if they are in judicial proceedings or not, before they can be repatriated. But there does not seem to be much effort to go after individual combatants.



Shombo walks or takes his motorbike to reach the mountainous communities in Sud-Kivu.

The Rwanda side shows even less interest.

“Unless Interpol comes looking for them, how would you know in Rwanda this person committed crimes in Congo?” said Francis Musoni, the coordinator of the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Program. “If they committed crimes in Congo, then it is up to Congo and Interpol to handle it, not Rwanda.”

Bolingo Baraka, 31, wore a bright yellow and green South African sports jacket, jeans and flip-flops. A rosary hung from his neck. He was staying in the tents where single men reside even though he has a wife and children. His family was at another camp, and he hasn't seen them in months. He hoped they could be located and repatriated with him.

He hasn't been in Rwanda since 1994, the year his family fled. His father died in the DRC, and he thinks his mother returned to Rwanda. He said he joined the FDLR because of the insecurity in the area. Then a radio broadcast convinced him life now might be better in Rwanda, and he turned himself in. He doesn't know when he will return to Rwanda or what he will do once he is there.

“I spent many years in the forest, so I first need to arrive and see how they live there,” he said.

*Katya Cengel was a 2016 fellow with the [International Women's Media Foundation's Africa Great Lakes reporting initiative](#).*

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# In Rwanda, female ex-combatants face reintegration challenge

## At Mutobo camp, former fighters spend three months being rehabilitated after returning from the DRC

February 25, 2016 5:00AM ET

*Since 2002, more than 30,000 foreign ex-combatants operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have been repatriated, the majority of them to Rwanda, where they spend three months at Mutobo Demobilization Camp. After decades spent fighting, the transition is not easy, especially for women. This is the second in a three-part series looking at ex-combatants, the environment and the complexities of repatriation and reintegration. [The first](#) looked at how combatants in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are convinced to lay down their arms.*

MUTOBO, Rwanda — Mutuyimana Jeanine clicks her heels and stands at attention. Then she waits in the doorway of Ephrem Kanamugire's office, entering only when the manager of Mutobo Demobilization Camp invites her in.

Jeanine is 34, but looks younger. She has four children and wears flip-flops with a butterfly design. When Hutu armed combatants from Rwanda fled to Zaire (now DR Congo) in 1994, Jeanine was 12 years old.

She also fled to Zaire in 1994, but for a different reason. Her parents were killed in the genocide during which the government's Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and civilian militias known as Interahamwe killed 800,000 people, most belonging to Rwanda's Tutsi minority, as well as moderate Hutus. Jeanine was fleeing those who killed her parents. The Hutu armed combatants who took part in the genocide, and Hutu refugees fearing reprisal killings, were fleeing the Rwanda Patriotic Front, a

Tutsi movement that had captured the Rwandan capital. Most of them ended up at the same place, Mugunga refugee camp in eastern Zaire.

But Jeanine returned to Rwanda in 1995 after surviving family members located her. She lived in Musanze with her two younger siblings and an older cousin in the home where her parents were murdered. But Rwanda wasn't as peaceful as Jeanine had been led to believe, especially where she was in the north of the country, not far from the border with DR Congo. In 1997 a Hutu rebel group came to her school and kidnapped seven students and a teacher. Jeanine was taken to the rebels' camp at Karasimbimbi volcano.

Because she was not actively fighting the government soldiers, the rebels accused Jeanine of being a traitor. She denied the charges. Jeanine knew their accusations were serious — she had seen them kill others who were friendly with government soldiers. After holding her hostage for seven months, they gave her a choice.



Teacher Alphonse Senyoni leads a class on history, politics and the 1994 genocide for former FDLR)combatants at the Mutobo Demobilisation Centre on April 10, 2014.

Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images

“They said ‘choose between two things: You are going to be killed or you are going to join us and become a soldier.’”

So Jeanine, then 16, became a child soldier.

Not long after, facing increasing attacks from the Rwandan armed forces, her group crossed into Zaire. They were not the only foreign combatants in the area. In the First Congo War, a rebel group supported by Rwanda, and led by Laurent-Desire Kabila, invaded Zaire, scattering Hutu rebels and refugees. As president of Zaire, Kabila renamed the country DR Congo. In the Second Congo War, Kabila supported Hutu rebels against rebels backed by Rwanda and Uganda. The Hutu groups, including Jeanine's, later consolidated into the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR).

The majority of the 30,600 foreign ex-combatants operating in DR Congo who have been repatriated to their homeland since 2002 belong to FDLR, according to United Nations Organisation Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO).

Jeanine is one of the 25,623 who returned, a number that includes former combatants and their

dependents.

Since Rwanda began repatriating foreign ex-combatants in 2001, around 10,000 or 11,000 have been repatriated from DR Congo, said Francis Musoni, coordinator of the Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Programme. The demobilization of foreign ex-combatants is part of a larger demobilization program run by the Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission that has demobilized 69,000 Rwandans, around 500 of them women. Until several years ago, the demobilization efforts also included current Rwandan government forces, but today the only people being demobilized are foreign ex-combatants.

The first place they go when they enter Rwanda is Mutobo. (There is a separate camp for child combatants.) At one point, 600 people passed through Mutobo every three months, the length of time they spend at the camp. Today, there are 53, three of whom are women. In the afternoon, after lectures are finished, children play soccer by the maize fields and cows graze near the administrative buildings. It could be mistaken for a peaceful mountain retreat — if it weren't for the Rwanda Genocide most wanted poster. Most of those returning now are too young to have participated in the genocide — between 23 and 37 years-old — said Mutobo manager Kanamugire. But that does not mean they are blameless.



Former FDLR combatants, including Peter Ngaboyamahina , center, attend a class on history, politics and the 1994 genocide at the Mutobo Demobilisation Centre April 10, 2014.

"Some of them, they will tell you frankly, that the only way of living (in DR Congo) was going to take somebody's food in the field" at gunpoint, said Kanamugire.

It falls on him and his staff of eight to reform them. The ex-combatants are given all they need, but no money. Some report their soap finished just a few days after receiving it, he said, far too soon for it to have been actually used up. Either they are stockpiling it, said Kanamugire, "or they have sold it around the corner to get some money."

The phenomenon may stem from a sense of insecurity about their future, something the center is meant to remedy. Many of the younger ex-combatants lack basic literacy, having not attended school after leaving Rwanda in 1994, said Kanamugire. At Mutobo, they spend an hour each morning learning to read and write. Their spouses and children go through a similar three-week program. They are taught that there are no longer Hutus or Tutsis, just Rwandans. Even so, they are warned there may be some who do not welcome them back, and advised on ways to handle this.

Aside from organized trips into the community to meet with ex-combatants who have successfully integrated into society, residents are required to stay at the camp, unless they obtain a pass, something Kanamugire tries to limit. When they are outside, he explained, they can buy gin. And when they drink, they fight. At the camp he maintains strict order. Although the center's mission is to turn soldiers into civilians, Kanamugire maintains the system of military rank from their combat days, otherwise, he said, "it will be chaos." Men and women are usually housed separately, but there are exceptions. Jeanine is able to share a room with her husband and youngest child. Jeanine may have been a simple FDLR soldier, but her husband was not.

Habamungu Desire was a colonel in FDLR in charge of external intelligence. Like many of his comrades, he had a number of aliases including Baba Adam, Kaduruvayo and Adolphe Habamungu. He is 49, which means he is old enough to have participated in the Rwandan genocide. But if he played an active role in the genocide, said Jeanine, his community in Rwanda would not have accepted him back, and that has not been the case. The couple and their children were able to visit Desire's old community over the winter holidays. Kanamugire and Musoni confirmed her statement. The real perpetrators of the genocide do not return to Rwanda, they said, because they know they will be turned in by the community.

There is no such accounting in DR Congo.

The first thing Jeanine was taught after she became a soldier was how to shoot a Kalashnikov. She was also taught that once you become a soldier, you are a soldier forever. For Jeanine, being a soldier meant cooking and fetching water, and then, when there was war, fighting. Although she said she did not hurt civilians other than to steal their crops, she admitted civilians ran away in fear whenever they saw her. She did not kill anyone when she wasn't fighting, she said. But "in the war, we were just fighting, so I could also fight and shoot other soldiers, so it's possible."

Kanamugire said it is not uncommon for FDLR soldiers to have been forced to kill comrades who tried to

escape. A young man who passed through the camp just before the current group was so haunted by the image of the man he killed that he had to be sent to the hospital for psychological treatment. Kanamugire estimated that in each group there are one or two who have severe enough psychological trauma to require hospitalization, the rest are treated by the camp psychologist. Almost all are haunted to some degree. When talking with them about what they have been through, sometimes Kanamugire notices a far away look in their eyes, as if they are somewhere else.

“You have to say ‘hey come back, come back.’”

For the first few nights Jeanine was at Mutobo she had nightmares. They were always the same. She was caught while trying to leave FDLR. If you are caught, you are killed. Which is why more don't return to Rwanda, said Kanamugire. That and the rhetoric they are fed by FDLR telling them they will be killed if they return. Jeanine believed it for a while. But in time she became tired of the constant fighting, the waking at 3 a.m. and having to run, the lack of education for her children. One day in November 2015 she and her children pretended to be headed to the fields to work. Her husband secretly followed. Only once they were out of FDLR territory did they ask to be taken to MONUSCO, which handles voluntary repatriation of foreign armed groups through a process called DDRRR: Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement.



Nyirahabimana Clementine with her baby, Merci Sifa, at Mutobo Demobilization Camp.

It was after her husband was killed during an attack by the Congolese army that Nyirahabimana Clementine decided to return to Rwanda. She was nine months pregnant and suffering from malaria. Clementine, now 27, was six years old when she left Rwanda and has never been to school. Her father was a member of the former Rwandan armed forces that took part in the genocide. During fighting in what was then Zaire, he was killed along with five of her siblings. When she was 17, her mother returned to Rwanda. Clementine chose to stay behind, fearful of the rumors she had grown up hearing about all the “killers” in Rwanda. By then she had already joined FDLR.

“I was living a miserable, horrible life and I decided to join the army,” she said.

There wasn't really any other option. Her marriage, she said, was not one of choice.

Cases of forced marriage and rape among female combatants are not unusual, said Clemence Niyonteze, head of gender issues at the Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission. Female combatants may be pressured by their superiors to perform sexual acts or marry in exchange for staying further from the fighting, she said.

“Being a female on the front, it's a big challenge.”

Even after they stop fighting, female combatants face additional challenges. Women with multiple children have trouble finding childcare in order to attend the vocational training the commission offers. Family responsibilities are one reason female ex-combatants often end up working in agriculture, because it allows them to stay close to home. The commission offers a number of work reintegration programs. Because agriculture plays such an important role in Rwandan society, there is a strong emphasis on agriculture, with plans to further expand the Mutobo introductory element in September. At present, there is a cabbage patch where ex-combatants practice using fertilizer and manure, things they didn't need in the fertile forests.

Both Jeanine and Clementine plan to work in agriculture when they leave Mutobo. But there is a problem — neither has land. Clementine's half brother sold all of her father's land while she was away in DR Congo. Jeanine's husband was married before he left Rwanda and in his absence his wife married his brother and took over his property.

Jeanine's three oldest children are currently living with her mother-in-law. The separation is hard on her. “But still, I'm OK,” she said. “Because I am a soldier, of course I can handle it.”

*Katya Cengel was a 2016 fellow with the International Women's Media Foundation's Africa Great Lakes Reporting Initiative.*

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# A long road to reintegration for Rwandan ex-combatants

## Despite programs aimed at helping former fighters recover and rebuild, many struggle to find their place in society

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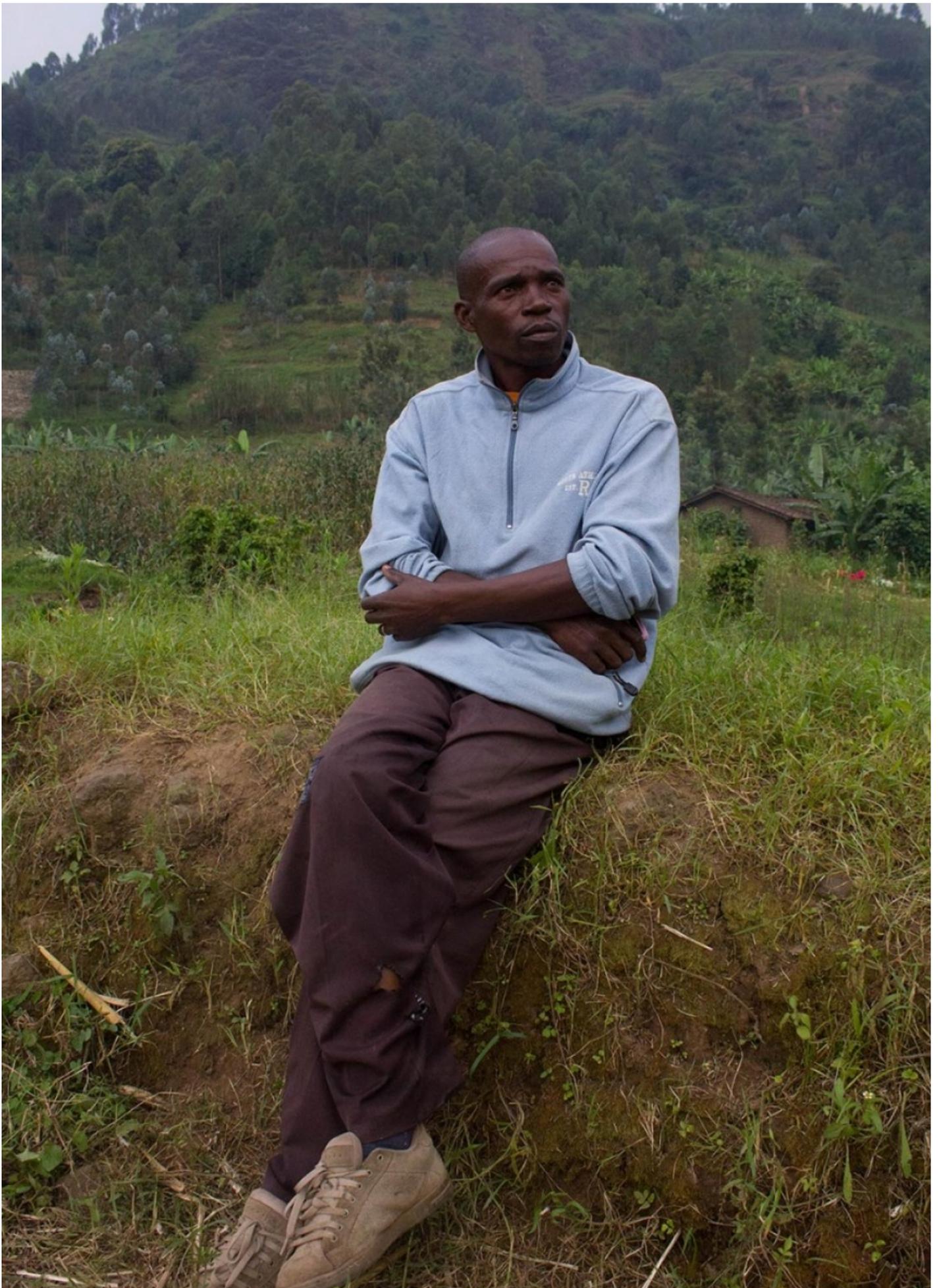
*Since 2002, more than 30,000 foreign ex-combatants operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have been repatriated, the majority of them to Rwanda. After spending three months at a demobilization camp, they are reintegrated back into the community. The government follows them every step of the way, mentoring them in a variety of programs, including agriculture. But years later, some still struggle to adapt. This is the third in a three part series looking at ex-combatants, the environment and the complexities of repatriation and reintegration. [The first](#) looked at how combatants in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are convinced to lay down their arms. [The second](#) examined the challenges female ex-combatants face.*

MUSANZE, Rwanda — It has been a decade since Nduhira Mathieu returned to Rwanda. In many ways, his life is a success. He is 46 and president of a brick making and agriculture cooperative that received five acres from the government when it was formed in 2011. More recently, the Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission (RDRC) awarded the co-op \$1,200, recognizing it for its economic and social integration success. The cooperative has 45 members, 15 of them ex-combatants like Mathieu. But Mathieu admits it was only three years ago that he felt accepted by the community. That was when Betty Tuyisenge invited him to her wedding.

"Before, I was thinking that I could not be invited to that wedding," he said. "Then, surprisingly, I was invited."

Tuyisenge is a genocide survivor. Mathieu was a member of the former government's Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) which, along with civilian militias known as Interahamwe, killed 800,000 people, most belonging to Rwanda's Tutsi minority during the 1994 genocide. After the Rwanda Patriotic Front took the capital from FAR, Mathieu fled to Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), where he later joined the Hutu armed group Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). In 2006 he returned to Musanze, the mountainous district in northern Rwanda where he grew up.

The Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission has demobilized 69,000 Rwandans, around 10,000 or 11,000 of them from DR Congo. (Until recently the demobilization efforts also included current Rwandan government forces.) Almost 15 years after Mutobo Demobilization Camp began demobilizing foreign ex-combatants, their reintegration is far from complete, with ex-combatants still struggling to adjust and the commission still heavily involved in their welfare.





Serugendo Deo, 45, is vice chairman of a brick making and agriculture cooperative in Rwanda's Musanze district.

Katya Cengel

Serugendo Deo, who returned in 2001 and is vice chairman of Mathieu's cooperative, was one of the first to pass through Mutobo. After completing the three-month program at Mutobo, which familiarizes foreign ex-combatants with the current situation in Rwanda, Deo began his reintegration into the community.

There is a name and acronym for almost every step of the demobilization and reintegration process overseen by the commission. There is BNK, Basic Needs Kit, which is basically 60,000 Rwandan francs (\$80) meant to pay for travel back to the community and initial resettlement. When they receive their BNK, ex-combatants are also provided with basic documents, including national identification papers, said Jeanette Kabanda, the commission's social and economic reintegration officer. Later, they receive reintegration grants of 120,000 francs (\$120) to start an IGP, Income Generating Project, or to pay for vocational training. Next, if they need it, comes VSW, or Vulnerability Support Window, which includes three options: 400,000 francs (\$534) for an income generating project, six months of vocational training, or two years of free education.

Each of Rwanda's five provinces has a provincial reintegration officer working under the commission. Robert Murenzi is the officer for the northern province. Part of his job is to follow up with ex-combatants to see how they are spending their money — it often isn't in the most productive way.

"The problem is their mentality," Murenzi said.

They have spent decades living as part of an armed group not having to worry about paying for food or anything else. Back in the community, he said, they suddenly have to pay for things like electricity and food and have trouble managing.

Ex-combatants like Deo counter that the money is not enough when you are starting from zero. Deo used his money to launch a business buying and reselling sorgum. The business did not do well. That is when he decided to form the cooperative with Mathieu and another ex-combatant. Like Mathieu, Deo is in his mid-40s and says while he was a member of FAR during the genocide, he did not kill civilians. If he had, he said: "I couldn't come back." It is a common refrain used among both the ex-combatants and members of the Rwandan government — and one that is difficult to prove. More clear are Deo's battle scars from years fighting in DR Congo. He points out the places where he was shot as he counts them off: one on his back, one on his forearm and so on, until he has shown all five.

The cooperative, said Deo, began with a brick building and then expanded to agriculture. Both operations are nestled in a green valley surrounded by hills. In the evening, frogs croak loudly and small children push

simple wheels near the maize and cabbage fields. Crops were an obvious choice for the group because there is always a demand for food, said Deo. It is an even more obvious enterprise for the commission to support, said Francis Musoni, coordinator of the commission's Demobilization and Reintegration Programme.

“In Rwanda, agriculture goes without saying, because like 95 percent of the people have something to do with agriculture,” Musoni said.

And having spent many years living in forests where they do not have the opportunity to farm or experience farming on land where crops grow more easily than in Rwanda, they return not knowing how to farm in their own country. The Rwanda Agriculture Board provides training, sending technicians to work with groups of ex-combatants in the fields, teaching them tactics for increasing production, how to protect crops from diseases and how to maintain the soil and use manure, said Murenzi. The commission, for its part, encourages local authorities to supply the ex-combatants with land and the ex-combatants to form cooperatives that include members of the local community. According to Kabanda, the cooperatives have “helped a lot because it takes care of the social part for unity and reconciliation.” The ex-combatants are usually eager to integrate, said Murenzi — the local community less so.

“At the beginning it was hard,” Mathieu said. “There was a kind of suspicion between the different groups.”



Mukanoheri Mary Chantal, 32, outside her fruit stand in Kigali, Rwanda.

The commission works hard to overcome this with a level of interference possible in a police state like Rwanda, where many aspects of citizens' lives are managed by the government. Within this system, the commission is able to organize communal work projects where ex-combatants and community members work together. Community meetings are held to further encourage cooperation between the two groups and “sensitization” sessions are arranged to help familiarize family members, and the larger community, with the unique needs of ex-combatants.

The effort appears to have paid off in the Muku area, where Mathieu's cooperative is based. Nshimiyimana Pierre, who manages the co-op's brick workers, considers the ex-combatants no different than any other community members. Aside from social integration, the coops also more closely resemble the ex-combatants' former system as members of armed groups, said Murenzi. But there is yet another reason the government likes coops — they make it easy for the government to keep tabs on the ex-combatants.

“We want them to be together in order to supervise them,” Murenzi said.

Musoni said there have not been any instances of violence or fighting among ex-combatants integrated back into the community. This is hard to verify, but the wife of one ex-combatant living in Kigali reported that her husband had been jailed for six months for an unknown reason.

Musoni did admit that alcohol abuse among ex-combatants is a problem. In his province, Murenzi started keeping a list of those with drinking problems. The list, he said, is growing. But both Musoni and Murenzi maintain they are on top of it, sending those who need it to a treatment center. The commission also recently launched a screening exercise to identify and treat those battling alcohol and drug addiction.

Mental health problems are more disruptive, said Musoni. While it is impossible to know the exact number, he estimates that about five percent of ex-combatants have visible mental health problems. From November 2015 to February 2016 mental health workers at the commission and in the community participated in a series of trainings conducted by Vivo International, a non-profit that focuses on mental rehabilitation of citizens in countries suffering from armed conflict. Fear of recapture, depression and delusion have been reported by those working with ex-combatants. The problems can continue long after the ex-combatants have returned to civilian life.

Mukanoheri Mary Chantal returned from fighting in DR Congo in 2002. When she talks about her time as a combatant she fidgets, twisting a small cloth in her hand, picking at a piece of wood on a counter.

“Sometimes, you meet with big problem, and you start thinking about what you have gone through, and you feel very bad,” Chantal said.

After being trained and working as a seamstress, Chantal, who is 32, managed to save enough to open a small fruit and vegetable stand in Kigali. But her success is limited. The stand is struggling and her husband, also an ex-combatant, is unemployed. It is difficult to pay school fees for her four children. Mathieu's success also seems small when compared to where he could have been had he not spent so

much of his life fighting in DR Congo. When foreign ex-combatants discover how much others have achieved while they were fighting they sometimes become troubled, said Murenzi.

“When they left, their younger brother was still a kid,” he explained. “Now their younger brother has a house, a farm, a pig project. And they can even become traumatized, saying, ‘how am I going to live here? Where am I going to start from?’”

That is what Mathieu regrets most — the time he lost.

“Because when I came back, I found everybody has gone far.”

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