



A young militia fighter holds up a belt of ammunition at a disarmament transit camp. Despite a UN-backed disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programme, many former militia fighters find it hard to secure a vocation once back in civilian society with many choosing to rejoin the militias.

Disarming the masses

BUNIA: The young girl clutching the handbag bulging with bullets waits to be waved through a United Nations disarmament point on the periphery of Bunia town.

Behind her a somewhat unruly mob gathered outside the barbed wire fencing protecting the site smoke cigarettes and heckle the Moroccan peacekeepers manning the entrance. Many appear no older than 15 or 16.

A former fighter with the Ituri National Front (FNI), the youthful looking girl who gave her name as Geri Dou says she joined the militia after all her family members were killed in the war. "I want to restart my life and live it as a normal civilian, that is why I am disarming," she says shyly.

As her and other individuals, many producing AK-47s and strings of bullets are waved through one at a time, the bounty of weapons and ammunition laid out on the ground is indicative of how casual the acceptance of gun culture is in the Democratic Republic of Congo's Ituri District.

The resumption of a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme at the beginning of June, has heralded a flood of weapons being traded in for financial rewards ahead of Congo's first democratic elections in over forty years.

Getting that message out to the armed individuals has taken a variety of forms. Regular broadcasts on the local Radio Okapi station, including by former militia commanders encouraging those remaining in the bush to enter the DDR, have been accompanied by massive airdrops of leaflets making people aware of the programme. This is often the first point of contact with the unknown number of militia fighters still active in Ituri.

With more than 2,574 people surrendering to enter the DDR programme and over 1700 weapons handed in since the beginning of June *[to the end of July]* it is evident of the manifestation of small arms and light weapons in this region of Africa's third largest country. It is hardly surprising. Congo is still struggling to emerge from two devastating wars that involved six outside countries and facilitated the mushrooming of myriad rebel groups and militia forces. In the aftermath of

what was dubbed 'Africa's World War', a vicious inter-ethnic conflict between the Hema and Lendu tribes – of which long-standing tensions were inflamed by outside forces with political and economic interests in Ituri's gold rich, green, rolling hills – continued to see much of the region and the rest of the eastern Congo flooded with weapons.

Having found their way into society, these weapons, ranging from pistols to automatic rifles, mortars, rocket propelled grenades, and various types of landmines, have remained.

In spite of the surprisingly positive response to the DDR programme's resumption, Clive Jachnik, Chief Technical Advisor for the Rapid Response Mechanism for United Nations Development Programme, sees it as a drop in the ocean.

"My particular worry is that in Bunia, owning a weapon is becoming an acceptable part of society," he says. "There are many villages here in Ituri where people are quite happy to take the gun from under their bed and join the militia if they were called upon to protect their societies."

"It is a cliché, but one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

Breaking that mindset is extremely difficult. Although many of the former fighting groups and rebel movements have now entered the political process in preparation for Congo's historic vote on 30 July, several militia groups opposed to the elections have joined under the loose umbrella organisation known as the Movement for the Revolution of Congo (MRC).

In addition to still posing a serious security threat and clashing with the Congolese Army and UN MONUC peacekeeping forces, one faction led by Peter Karim which took seven peacekeepers hostage on 28 May, are still holding five after releasing two at the end of June.

The sporadic clashes with the army, who are attempting to impose some authority and order, randomly and regularly displace people in their thousands. And the civilian population is often the victims of ambushes and raids by the militias.

Official estimates of the MRC's strength are put in the region of 2,500-3,000 but no-one knows for sure. It is quite conceivable their numbers could be a great deal higher.

Despite the encouraging figures of fighters entering the DDR programme, Jachnik concedes it is unlikely that every person coming in is one less militiaman out in the bush.

"Are we enabling people to come and reap the benefits of DDR, many of them financial, using an old rifle that they keep as a number three weapon when they still have two others?"

For a region where extreme poverty is commonplace and the infrastructure of social society virtually non-existent, the financial rewards of entering the DDR programme, however, are a handsome prospect.

Following initial disarmament, former combatants spend three days in a demobilisation camp in Bunia where they are registered - including an iris scan to ensure people do not pass through more than once - and sensitised about the DDR process.

They are also given an entry kit which includes soap, a blanket, sleeping mat, toothbrush, sandals, bucket for washing and a water container.

It is at the camp where they decide whether to re-enter civilian society or join the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) and continue their life as soldiers.

For those who choose the former, they are given an initial \$110 on leaving the camp. They then receive a further \$25 a month for the next twelve months, at the end of which, they have a chance of a further \$400 to devise their own income-generating project such as opening a shop or buying a motorbike.

Yet in a part of the world where a working AK-47 can cost as little as \$30, offering financial gain for giving up a weapon can on the one hand solve a problem while at the same time create a conducive environment to encourage their ownership.

"By doing what we do in DDR, are we in fact broadening requirements for weapons in the area?" says Jachnik.

Key to the success of any DDR programme is not just relieving people of their weapons, but implementing long term processes that ensure those disarmed do not drift back to their former life as fighters in the bush.

Initiatives such as retraining, apprenticeships, micro-finance and agriculture are all crucial aspects which, as Jachnik describes, keeps the militias' hands busy after disarming and demobilising.

"One of the things which often fails to be achieved in DDR, and planning in DDR is notoriously poor, is that the international community does not use the correct resources available on the

ground."

This is something that Petronille Vwaweka, District Commissioner of Bunia and herself a pro-active force in encouraging people to disarm, laments regarding the first DDR programme carried out in Ituri, which finished in mid 2005.

"The DDR programme failed because these projects were organised and elaborated in air-conditioned offices without the inclusion of local people," she says. "They did not know which projects were to be in the interest of the ex-combatants and they were implemented without any support from the local communities."

The result was that the disarmament was not comprehensive enough, and while it may have quelled the flames, it did not put out the fire.

It is also the continuing smuggling of arms in to the region that perpetuates the problem. General Mbuayama Nsiona, overall commander of FARDC in Ituri District says the infiltration of light weapons such as the AK-47 remains a serious issue.

"The difficulty is policing people along the border areas and checking them," he says. "At the border posts it is difficult as the authorities do not have the capacity to inspect every piece of luggage, every vehicle, every bag of cassava, beans or rice; everything that is entering from outside."

As long as there is a demand, there will ultimately remain a supply. Jachnik says that arms proliferation is quite an easy game to dodge the law in. "You may be able to find the manufacturing company or base," he says, "but that does not necessarily mean you can point the finger at the person who imported the weapons."

Back at the disarmament point and others across Ituri, people continue to arrive daily to take advantage of what the DDR programme has to offer. Yet with a deadline of 15 July - already extended from the end of June - many combatants, and more crucially many weapons, are likely to remain active in Ituri's lush wilderness.

And in spite of the programme's unanticipated success, with still active militia ahead of an uncertain political period for Congo, Jachnik concedes: "I am sad to say that I am not a great optimist for Ituri at the moment."

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