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# RI BULLETIN

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## **Democratic Republic of the Congo: FDLR Militia Dependents Vulnerable**

In the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a Rwandan militia group, the FDLR (Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda), may finally be ready to lay down their arms and return in peace to Rwanda. But as the return process begins to be negotiated and organized, MONUC, the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC, the government of Rwanda and other implementing agencies are not paying adequate attention to the needs of FDLR dependents, leaving at least 40,000 women and children potentially vulnerable.

Tens of thousands of Rwandans have been living in the eastern DRC since the 1994 genocide in Rwanda – some as refugees and some as members of the FDLR. As conflict has swirled through the eastern DRC, militias and fighting forces have forcibly abducted Congolese women to serve as their “wives”. The UN women’s agency, UNIFEM, has stressed the importance of gathering information on this group and considering their needs in the planning of the demobilization and reintegration process. However, MONUC has made no plans to gather further information on the situation of the dependent women of the FDLR and have not planned any special efforts to sensitize these women to their rights in the repatriation process. A Kinshasa-based official involved in the demobilization program insisted to Refugees International, “They have been in the Congo for eleven years already! It’s not like they haven’t had time to think [repatriation to Rwanda] over.”

Currently, MONUC is running a general sensitization campaign through Radio Okapi [the public information station jointly run by MONUC and *Fondation Hirdondelle*] and also employing local personnel who try to reach the FDLR and their dependents in the forest. While Rwandan women that RI interviewed in the transit sites did acknowledge the role of Radio Okapi in alerting them to the return process, the radio campaign does not seem to provide crucial information for the dependents. For example, the women seemed uninformed about any benefits packages, taking the opportunity of their interview with RI to question officials about them. “Will I be able to find tools to farm with when I return?” asked Marie, a mother of five returning to Rwanda for the first time in ten years. Refugees International fears that standards of informed consent are not being met for the dependents of FDLR combatants.

The eastern DRC has seen extremely high levels of sexual violence targeted towards women. This fact, combined with the knowledge that some of the dependents of the FDLR combatants may have been abducted against their will and forced to become “wives” of combatants, obligates MONUC to take every precaution to ensure that they are respecting the rights of

Rwandan and Congolese women involved in the movement of FDLR combatants to Rwanda. Women need the opportunity and the time, in a private space, to learn what the repatriation will involve, express their concerns about the process, and make an informed decision as to whether they want to return with the FDLR combatants, return independently, or remain in the Congo. Officials responsible for the demobilization program told RI that they assume that women are not being coerced to return with the combatants, but they appear to have little basis on which to make this assumption. “We were never supposed to be in the business of providing anything other than a bus ride over the border to Rwanda,” said a MONUC official. There have already been reports of Congolese women returning to the DRC after being taken to Rwanda by FDLR combatants. While no one has reported that these women were forcibly taken to Rwanda, it remains an area of concern.

As the news of the FDLR repatriation reaches the Rwandans living in the forest in North and South Kivu in the DRC, Rwandan refugees have begun to present themselves at sites run by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in order to be repatriated. UNHCR reports that they have repatriated 3,700 Rwandans since the beginning of 2005 and that the number of returning Rwandan refugees has doubled every month. The increase in refugees returning home suggests that the number of FDLR and their dependents who are willing to return may be quite high. Current estimates run between 10,000 - 15,000 combatants and 40,000 - 60,000 dependents. “We’ve been repatriating FDLR combatants and dependents since 2000. Now we handle approximately 50 a week and with the existing capacity we can process 100 a day per each of the six centers,” said one official working on the demobilization program. However, another MONUC official confided, “With greater numbers, I would be very surprised if we can channel the participants through that quickly.” The needs of dependents may be ignored in the latter scenario. The FDLR themselves have been reluctant to fully engage in the demobilization process, not providing numbers of combatants nor a timeline for demobilization.

The humanitarian agencies involved in the demobilization and reintegration program in Rwanda currently have limited capacity to provide protection to children, including both dependents and former child soldiers. UNHCR Rwanda, which is currently attempting to handle an influx of Congolese refugees and the increasing numbers of repatriating Rwandan refugees, processes the dependents of the FDLR at the same transit site, Nkamira, near Gisenyi, Rwanda. While the dependents only stay in the transit site for 24 hours, UNHCR is already struggling to accommodate the Congolese refugees in the camp. In addition, recent breaks in the food pipeline may jeopardize any assistance that repatriating dependents may receive. (See the RI bulletin <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/5822>.)

While the willingness of the Government of Rwanda to accept all the dependents of the militia, be they Rwandan or Congolese, is admirable, the Government has not been clear what protection or assistance is available for women and dependents after they have been received in Rwanda. Of particular concern is what will be planned for the combatants and their dependents once they reach their home community. The World Bank has said that it will consider extending their funding to include support for dependents. Currently, it is aimed exclusively at ex-combatants. It is urgent that support mechanisms for the dependents be put in place immediately as there have already been reports of Congolese women returning from Rwanda after rejection in Rwandan communities. A humanitarian worker told RI, “It is possible that women will not be accepted by the family once they are taken into Rwanda. We hope it will be sorted out at the local authority level or by their husbands.” Without conscious attention to this issue in the planning process, Congolese women will certainly be ignored once they have been left in the communities.

Many agencies in North Kivu pointed out that women who were abandoned by their husbands or who refuse to go to Rwanda do not benefit from the demobilization and reintegration program at all. The government of the DRC along with international agencies must organize a response to their needs for protection and assistance.

**Therefore Refugees International recommends that:**

- MONUC ensure that the demobilization plan reflects the special needs of FDLR dependent women and children. A quick response protection mechanism should be also created in case security problems for dependents arise;
- MONUC insure that local Congolese women's organizations are used to provide services to sensitize female dependents in the FDLR demobilization sites;
- MONUC consider extending the length of time that FDLR dependents are kept in demobilization sites to ensure that sensitization exercises can take place;
- MONUC, together with other humanitarian agencies, immediately set up mechanisms to assist Congolese women dependents of the FDLR who have returned from Rwanda to the DRC;
- The Government of Rwanda detail what kind of assistance will be provided to dependents after the initial reception so humanitarian agencies can begin to plan support reintegration programs;
- The World Bank finalize funding to support dependents of the FDLR in the repatriation process, making resource available to both the Rwandan Government and humanitarian agencies;
- UNHCR in Rwanda monitor the degree of integration in Rwanda of FDLR dependents upon return and ensure that they have access to protection assistance if needed.

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*Sarah Martin and Andrea Lari just returned from a three-week mission to the DRC and Rwanda.*