

SPECIAL REPORT

Museveni demobilises the NRA

By NATION CORRESPONDENT

The military helicopter landed in the middle of the headquarters' parade grounds, under thousands of pairs of watchful eyes. For once, it was not a combat operation.

The helicopter was bringing in loads of money directly from the Uganda National Bank to the barracks, 90 km. North of the capital, Kampala. Money which would enable the Army to send thousands of soldiers back to their homes.

The demobilisation of the National Resistance Army (NRA) is the first clear sign of Uganda's willingness to enter a peaceful era.

Notwithstanding the numerous difficulties to be faced, the project of sending soldiers home is smoothly progressing.

About 20,000 soldiers have been demobilised so far from the beginning of the operation last December. Twenty thousand more are scheduled to leave the army before the end of 1994.

The National Resistance Army is estimated to have about 80,000 men and women; a huge military force for a small country, whose economy has yet to recover from more than 25 years of civil war and mismanagement by different dictators.

"You have to look at the back of this Army," says retired Major General Emilio Mondo, Executive Secretary of the Veterans Assistance Board in charge of the implementation of the demobilisation programme.

"The National Resistance Army was born in the bush, and fought a guerrilla war for five years to remove dictators. Then after coming to power in 1986, some insurgency movements rose in the North and in the East of the country, and the NRA had to further beef up its exercise in order to beat them," explains the retired Major General.

Previous attempts by Western donors to have the army cut back had failed as President Yoweri Museveni insisted on the need of a big force to fight the rebellion up in the North.

Today, the President is confident enough in his position to allow the reduction of the army to half its size. He also knows that his country cannot afford any more the massive costs of an army that consumed more than 74 million US dollars in 1990 alone.

"We reckon Uganda is saving 1.5 billion shillings a month with the 3,000 demobilised soldiers sent home today (February 15, 1993)," says Mr Nat Colletta, a specialist in Human Resource Development for the World Bank, one of the major donors for the project.

"I hope you write this story right," cautions Mr Colletta while monitoring the demobilisation exercise at Singo military headquarters, that day in February.

And he adds, "because what you see here today is a part of what one might call war to peace transition, where resources are being shifted from defence to productive investments, agriculture and social sectors".

Many hopes are resting on this project; the ones of the soldiers who volunteered to leave the Army and go back to a civilian life; the ones of their families, who can plan ahead for a peaceful, normal life.

The hopes of the Western donors who are looking at Uganda's implementation of the demobilisation process as a means of showing other African countries like Mozambique and Angola the real way to peace.

But most of all, the Uganda government is keeping its fingers crossed hoping to be able to give the veterans what they were promised when they were registered to go home.

"What we are doing now, which is giving out assistance for immediate settlement, is not enough," admits Maj. General Mondo when asked about the future of the ex-soldiers.

The resettlement programme entitles each veteran to a so-called 'safety net package' that should see them through the first six months of their civilian life.

The package includes a first cash payment on the day of departure of Uganda Sh150,000 (125 US\$), which should cover the costs of transport of the soldiers and their families to their home areas, as well as the basic needs of food, medicines and pocket money for the time being.

Two more payments are due after 6 and 10 weeks, of about 160 and 180 US\$.

The veterans will also receive incentives in kind, such as building material for their houses and school fees for their children, which will be paid directly to the schools where the children will be registered.

"The next payments will be put in bank accounts that the veterans will have to open as soon as they arrive back home. "We want to educate them to keep some money aside," explains General Mondo.

Everything has been organised in order to avoid as much as possible any waste or misuse of the money. Nevertheless, there have been cases of soldiers who spent all of it in one go on stereos, beer and women and the government fears that the men, once without money and without jobs, will use any means to get what they need.

"It is true that the army has taken the opportunity to get rid of the indisciplined soldiers. That also includes the drunk, and those parasites who certainly cannot continue living off the welfare of the army," continues the retired General.

About 25 per cent of the demobilised soldiers go under the label "service no longer required". Another 10 per cent are aged soldiers, 55 years old or above. A further 10 per cent are the sick men, which means in most cases soldiers with Aids or are HIV positive.

Two thousand soldiers die of Aids every year, and thousands more are infected with the virus. Hundreds of soldiers died or grew too sick to be demobilised in the short period of time that went from the registration phase to the actual demobilisation.

But if the sick and the aged will not be able to help the country recover from its decades-old wounds, the remaining 55 per cent of the soldiers who are going home are volunteers willing to work hard and build a future for themselves and for their children.

"I have already bought spare parts for my father's vehicle which broke down, and I am going to repair it and start driving it. I don't want to stay in their army because I have worked enough, I want to go home," affirms Joseph Bifabusha, a driver in the NRA for the past seven years.

He has just received his first payment at the Singo Headquarters, and although the money is not much, he is confident that his family will survive.

For other people though, the future is not so promising, as they don't have a job to go back to.

"We need to follow the veterans up, give them training, im-

part skills to them that would make them employable or self-employed, so that they can sustain themselves," warns the Veterans Assistance Board secretary.

The risk of having bands of veterans marauding the rural areas is real. Many villagers have already experienced looting and killing by armed bandits, and they are not very enthusiastic about receiving the ex-soldiers on a permanent basis.

"There might be some cases where civilians might show some resentment, but those will be negligibly few," assures General Mondo, who guarantees that the veterans will have a warm reception from their families, relatives and friends.

A great deal importance rests on the results and effectiveness of the second phase of the programme, that is the reintegration process.

A government survey indicated that 70 per cent of the demobilised soldiers wanted to go back to the land and farm. Arrangements have been made to identify areas where land is available, and the veterans will receive tools and seeds as part of the project. Efforts have been made to give them a good chance to stick to a normal life.

Western donors are giving US\$23 million for this exercise, and rarely have donors been so enthusiastic about the results obtained with their funds.

"To date we are very satisfied. Of course, only the long term programme of reintegration into the community will tell the final result of such an effort, but for the moment we are very satisfied," affirms Mr Colletta of the World Bank.

There were 3,000 soldiers nervously lining up for the various steps of the demobilisation procedures, that day of February at the Singo barracks.

Many of their families were camping under the shade of some trees, or behind the trucks neatly parked around the parade grounds, waiting to take them to their home districts.

The soldiers and their families didn't have much to take back to their villages: some mattresses, a couple of chairs, a bundle of clothes. But they had a lot of hope, and perhaps that alone will be enough to help them overcome the hard times ahead.



Clockwise from top right: A young lady gets her first instalment of the money government is paying out to demobilised soldiers; a demobilised soldier's family waits patiently for transport back home and the men who are still in uniform get their orders.