

South Sudan launches national disarmament campaign

Thursday 29 September 2011

By Ngor Arol Garang

September 29, 2011 (JUBA) - South Sudan launched an official national Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration strategic plan on Wednesday, days after the cabinet passed a resolution allowing the removal of 150,000 combatants from the new country's rebel group turned national army the SPLA.

Speaking at a press conference, William Deng Deng, chairperson of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration commission in the newly born state of South Sudan said 80,000 soldiers would be removed from the army and 70,000 moved into the police, prison, wildlife, fire brigade and other security organs.

David Gressly, former United Nations regional Coordinator for South Sudan, in June estimated the number of the Sudan People's Liberation Army could be between 150,000 and 200,000.

Deng said the countrywide exercise would take about six to eight years to be completed. Around 4,500 member ex-combatants will be reintegrated into various communities across the country in the early months of 2012. He described the exercise as an "expensive and complex program" saying it involved a lot of challenges especially rehabilitation and insertion of people into civilian life whose only previous skill was knowing how to use a gun.

"This is a very expensive and complex program but it can be implemented because it is a program owned and led by the government. It is also complex because it involves individuals and community," Deng told journalists at a press conference held at the premises of his commission on Wednesday.

CHILD SOLDIERS

He denied that the army was either holding or recruiting child soldiers. However he acknowledged that there may still be negligible numbers of child soldiers in the SPLA.

Deng said that some children "who do not have anything to do in the community" sometimes "come and hang out in the barracks" because there is nothing better to do. He said this could not be described as recruiting but was socialising. "They play football and find food there", he explained.

The DDR official said that they had also disarmed children from other armed groups after they had been integrated into the SPLA.

"So it is not true that the Sudan People's Liberation Army recruits children into army service. The SPLA is demobilising some of its army to go into the civil population so why would they recruit again", he said.

"The DDR process focuses on integrating combatants from the civil war into civil population and take through some process and provided them with job-training and support to re-enter society", he explained.

He continued to explain that the DDR process supports returning soldiers to be absorbed socially and economically so as to avoid frustrations over unemployment after they return to civilian life.

South Sudan fought for decades against various Khartoum governments until a peace deal in 2005. In July this year, after a referendum in January, South Sudan seceded from the north.

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