Demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A never-ending story

Henri Boshoff

One of the key issues in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that has not been resolved is the process of demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR). It is unfortunate that unless the DDR process is completed, the security sector reform (SSR) process cannot start.

During a visit to the Institute for Security Studies in January 2007, Ambassador Aldo Ajelo, the European Union envoy for the Great Lakes region, made it clear that the completion of the DDR process and the start of SSR are crucial for the successful post-conflict reconstruction process in the DRC. These issues were discussed in detail at the last two meetings of the contact group of ten European and African countries that support the DDR/SSR process in the DRC.

* Henri Boshoff is a senior military analyst at the African Security Analysis at the Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, South Africa.
Despite the acknowledgement of role-players that DDR/SSR is important, there is still a lack of coordination between the government, the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Monuc) and the contact group.

At the last contact group meeting in Brussels, on 17 November 2006, it was suggested that the European Union take the lead in the coordination process on behalf of the group. The EU delegation explained their intention to play an overall coordinating role in security sector reform in the DRC. This had been announced on 15 September 2006 through an EU Council declaration.

A draft paper was circulated by the EU delegation at that contact group meeting. The paper outlined some general principles of the EU approach, such as an intensive coordination between Congolese authorities and third parties through Kinshasa-based comités de suivi. It was suggested that three comités de suivi (army, police and justice) be created and each comité to be presided over by a competent Congolese minister. Global supervision will be through a broader commission to be presided by the future prime minister. All relevant partners could have a seat in these comités. The EU also stated that they were ready to provide logistical support to these comités de suivi.

The UN delegation pointed out that EU intentions for a coordinating role could fit perfectly into the UN approach. As the UN is working on a global, well-defined exit strategy which foresees a continued post-transition UN role, other partners could take the lead in a specific sector, such as justice and army. On the other hand, the UN intends to remain active in the police sector. Monuc does not intend to play a major role in SSR, although it will continue to provide short-term support to the integrated brigades of the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC) – mainly in the east of the country and aiming at joint operations with the FARDC.

Monuc will participate in the comités de suivi and will promote transparency and good governance in the three sub-sectors. This was in general accepted, although Monuc pointed out that it still had a UN mandate to adhere to.

Several delegations insisted on the importance of Congolese ownership of the SSR process and the need for an overarching Congolese vision/framework to which the three comités de suivi should refer in the course of their work. It is indeed important that the international community and the Congolese authorities have a clear and similar understanding of the global direction and aims of the process.

It is clear from the discussions in Brussels and the position of the different role players that there is still no consensus about coordination. Since President Laurent Kabila has now appointed his cabinet – including a Minister of Defence and a Secretary of Defence – and has confirmed the Chief of Defence Staff, it is important that the SSR process should start.
What is the present status of the FARDC and the DDR process? According to the Multi-Country Demobilisation and Reintegration Programme (MDRP), to date the project has demobilised almost 94,000 ex-combatants. The Commission Nationale de Déarmement, Démobilisation et Réinsertion (Conader) has closed all orientation centres (COs) and is using mobile units to handle the final wave of demobilisation (under the plan de relance), which is supposed to be completed by 31 December 2007. This plan envisions to process up to 44,000 ex-combatants.

Although the project was expected to demobilise 118,000 ex-combatants by the end of 2006, the process was not completed because of lack of funding. The planned demobilisation of a further 70,000 combatants has not taken place yet because of a change in the strategy of the Congolese government. The government decided to first integrate the forces in the east into mixed brigades before starting the demobilisation. This process has also failed and the possibility of war in North Kivu looms large.

Some 25,000 children who were involved in the fighting have also been demobilised through special projects implemented by Unicef and specialised NGOs. These projects were scheduled to close by 31 December 2006, at which point an estimated caseload of 8,700 children would still need to be demobilised. Because of a lack of funds no further demobilisation of children has taken place except for some 300 children from General Nkunda’s brigades.

Political constraints to completing the DDR and army integration process continue to this day. For political reasons groups such as the Republican Guard and residual troops refuse or are unable to enter the process and continue to pose a security risk in the country. Twenty-five thousand ex-combatants in Kinshasa and 11,300 in other military regions have not gone through the National Programme of Disarmament, Démobilisation and Reintegration (PNDDR) process and 36,000 ex-combatants still have to be processed in terms of the plan de relance. The PNDDR’s budget of US$200 million was either disbursed or has been committed for ongoing project activities. The available budget is only sufficient to cover demobilisation of and reinsertion payments for 103,000 ex-combatants and reintegration support for 68,500 ex-combatants.

What does this mean in practice? The integrated combatants have been organised in 18 brigades, which are mostly deployed in the east of the DRC. Most are in bad shape and are not staffed according to the original planning. Most soldiers are more concerned with their survival and have hardly any training. Commanders also need logistical support to deploy the brigades in operations against rebels and militia. Living conditions in brigades and of dependants must also be improved substantially in order to maintain security. Recent conflict in North Kivu has shown that the integrated brigades do not have the capacity to counter the rebels without the support of Monuc. To try and address this problem Monuc has proposed, together with the
United Nations Development Fund (UNDP), a support plan that consists of the following elements:

- A consolidation of the brassage by financially supporting the integrated brigades and their dependants

- A conceptual approach to give advice to the Congolese authorities on future format of new military at the organisational level

- Support at the tactical level by temporarily funding for every brigade, estimated at US$290 000 per month per brigade for salaries

- Operational and logistical assistance provided through the UNDP rapid response mechanism

It is thus clear that the DDR process must be completed, and must include the Presidential Guard, the Kinshasa Garrison and the residual of Bemba’s soldiers. The process of SSR can only start after the DDR process has been completed and the new Congolese cabinet has been appointed. The only way to get the programme on track is to complete the DDR process and adopt a global approach involving all role-players, national and international. SSR is not only about the reform of army, police and justice, but should include the intelligence sector, border control, and customs.

The EU delegation to the DRC has developed what they call a ‘governance compact’ that include the SSR sector and constitutes a link between the compact and the three comités de suivi (SSR) and how it could be developed. The Congolese authorities will preside over the comités de suivi (and the global commission) and thus lead the initiative. The importance of Congolese ownership of the SSR process and the need for an overarching Congolese vision/framework to which the three comités de suivi should adhere are key for cooperation with the external role players.

It is important that both the international community and the Congolese authorities have a clear and a similar understanding of the global direction and aims. The drafting of ‘white papers’ for the three sub-sectors is considered to be essential for such a global conceptual approach. While the Congolese authorities should draft these white papers, the external role players could give advice. There is an understanding that Congolese authorities would start with the white paper on defence sector reform, but they should be encouraged to draft white papers on police and justice sector reform as well.

In the next few months the completion of the DDR process, the Monuc proposal for post-conflict reconstruction and consensus on coordination between the external role-players on how to move forward with SSR will be crucial for the successful start of the SSR process.