

Ex-rebels find hope in environment restoration

BY ROBERT EDEMA

YUMBE. The government, through the Amnesty Commission, has launched an environmental management and tree planting initiative targeting ex-combatants as a strategy to promote reintegration, environmental restoration, and community stability in Yumbe District.

At the weekend, about 40 ex-combatants in Kululu Sub-county, completed training on environment management and tree planting in partnership with Yumbe District Forestry department to kick start the implementation of the project.

Ms Zubeda Abiria, a war survivor from the sub-county, said the big population in Yumbe is exerting a lot of pressure on the natural resources.

"We had a lot of trees in Yumbe, but

have lost most of them. The high poverty level is causing the community to cut the trees for charcoal production, and firewood," she said.

"Previously, we received rain in time that facilitates the timely planting of crops. This is no longer there, as deforestation has affected the rain pattern, and we sometimes incur a lot of losses as the crops planted dry off due to long dry spells," she added.

An extension worker in the Forest department, Mr Swaib Kama, said the district is grappling with increasing deforestation driven by charcoal burning, firewood demand, and settlement expansion.

"Deforestation remains a major challenge due to high demand for charcoal and firewood. By engaging former combatants in tree planting, we are promoting both environmental protection and

peaceful reintegration," he said.

He added: "During the refugee emergency programme, partners planted a lot of trees in Yumbe, which was a big financial investment. However, most of the trees failed to grow due to poor management."

Hopeful

As Yumbe battles both environmental degradation and the social consequences of past conflicts, leaders hope that turning former fighters into environmental stewards will plant the seeds of lasting peace.

An ex-combatant, Mr Talib Aroma, said life after conflict has been tough for many fighters in West Nile, as they face stigma, unemployment, and uncertainty since their return.

He said tree planting is a good project and helps one to sustain his/her liveli-

hood.

"When I returned from the bush and settled with the Amnesty Commission, I used part of my land (one acre) to plant trees. These are now helping me to get money to pay school fees for my children," he said.

Lt Col (Rtd) Ernest Obitre Gama, the Amnesty Commission's officer in charge of West Nile, said: "We have been previously supported by donors but for the last 15 years, they withdrew, and the responsibility to cater for the former fighters went back to the government."

"The government, through the Amnesty Commission's reintegration programme decided that instead of giving them (ex-combatants) some cash, they must be trained to get their living as the money is insufficient for all," he added.

That is why the former rebels are being trained in environmental manage-

ment and tree planting, to empower them live a very meaningful life in the community.

Officials say many former fighters struggle to secure a stable income after returning to civilian life.

Limited employment opportunities and community stigma often complicate reintegration efforts.

Mr Sam Gule, the senior assistant chief administrative officer for Kululu Sub-county, said their lives depend on the environment, and it must be conserved.

"Most of our people are encouraged to plant trees without being taught the necessary skills of planting and managing the trees. We will soon start receiving rains, and this should be used for the growth of the trees," he said.

He said there is vast land in Yumbe to support woodlot establishment, coupled with that of the ex-combatants, which they should use part of it for planting trees.

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