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Workshop on the Review of Disarmament, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement Procedures and Capacity for the Returnees of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)

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OPENING REMARKS

BY

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AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION

Distinguished Representatives of Troop Contributing Countries

Distinguished Representatives of Regional Task Force, US partners, United Nations, ICRC and civil society partners,

Distinguished Guests,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this Workshop on the “Review of Disarmament, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement Procedures and Capacity for the Returnees of the LRA”. This meeting is important as it brings together representatives from a broad cross-section of the national, regional and local stakeholders who have been working together on the handling of LRA returnees.

Much progress has been made in the fight against the LRA since the authorization by the Africa Union Peace and Security Council of the AU-led Regional Cooperation Initiative (RCI) for the elimination of the LRA in November 2011. The work and achievements of the RCI LRA provide a useful demonstration of what can be achieved when we are able to work together effectively on an issue of common concern and interest.

Distinguished Guests,

One of the critical components of the fight against the LRA has been the efforts to supplement the military operations with psychosocial programs, including the “Come Home” defection messaging and the support offered to the returnees in a manner that is consistent with relevant international law and standards. This includes ensuring that they are disarmed, properly received and handled, safely repatriated, and supported with their reintegration process.

It is noted that the LRA leadership uses threats, punishing sanctions and negative messaging to discourage defection from its ranks. This is the reason the approach of using testimonies from returnees, to the effect that they have been humanely treated and supported to reunite with their families and communities can, and in many cases already has, helped to counter the propaganda of the LRA leadership . Indeed, these testimonies broadcast over several radio stations can be attributed to the defection of between 400 to 500 LRA members since the launch of the RCI-LRA.

In the same way, it is also important to note that the activities of the LRA across the four affected countries have left in its aftermath severely traumatized individuals, families and indeed whole communities. This has sometimes led to tensions within and between communities. This is more so if stories emerge that an individual escaping from the LRA, and whose safe return has been long hoped for, has been mishandled. Ensuring the safe return, repatriation and reintegration of ex-combatants is therefore an essential component of efforts to restore and safeguard inter-communal relationships damaged by the LRA, including cross border links and ties.

On the other hand, it is important that efforts aimed at repatriation and reintegration of the ex-combatants should take into consideration the need to prepare the receiving communities into which they will be reintegrated. The local communities should not develop the impression that the returnees are being “rewarded” for what they did; otherwise these communities that are viewed as victims will become perpetrators as they seek to mete out punishment of the returnees rather than their reintegration into society. It is, of course, also important to have a clear understanding of the nature of grievances that the local communities have for proper reconciliation to take place and, therefore, for durable reintegration process to take place.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am aware of the valuable work undertaken to develop Standard Operating Procedures and the efforts that have gone into aligning these. I also note that the LRA Focal Points meeting held in Entebbe, from 8-9 September 2015 noted that challenges existed with the current repatriation processes and raised the need for support arrangements and that led to the convening of this Workshop to review current practices and identify ways forward.

That such challenges arise is inevitable given the nature of the environment in which the RCI-LRA is operationalized and the fact that the situation has evolved significantly both in terms of the lower numbers of returnees and reducing resources.

However challenges also often present opportunities. In this case they have provided a valuable opportunity to bring together people such as yourselves who have become experienced specialists in dealing with the issues on the ground. You are all therefore best placed to understand the challenges but also to identify practical and realistic solutions to them.

In closing, I recognize the contribution of every key stakeholder and partner in the fight against the LRA and thank the UN for sponsoring this Workshop. I look forward to your valuable contributions over the next two days to chart a practical way forward to strengthen the messaging to encourage the LRA combatants to come out, and to put in place robust reintegration approaches for the returnees.

I wish you successful deliberations, and thank you for your attention.