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Farming side by side brings military and civilians together

In Luvungi, in Sud Kivu, trust is returning between soldiers and civilians farming together in the same field. Violence and abuse by the army has halted, to the relief of the local population

It is nearly 30°C on this late March Friday in Luvingi, a town close to Uvira and within sight of Bujumbura. Civilians and soldiers shout, sing and dance together, all the while keeping an eye on the 80kg bags of groundnuts that each one has received. This is the harvest from the field which they planted together a few months ago and which their joint committee, set up at the beginning of this project, has just distributed. "These civilians have become more important to me than my brothers who are live away and than my officers who only occasionally send my salary" exclaims Corporal Charles Eyenga, a member of the Army's (FADRC) local committee for civilian protection.

The town of Lubingi is home to the FARDC's 8th integrated brigade, under reconstruction after a decade of civil war. This military presence worries the local population who, since 1994, have endured successive raids by the Rwandan FDLR fighters, the Burundian National Liberation Front (FNL), various local Maï Maï rebels and even government soldiers. This is why, since September 2008, Search for Common Ground and the Ministry of the Church of Christ in Congo for Refugees and Emergencies (ECC-Meru) is trying to bring together the population and the army.

A valued community field

Therefore, every Saturday, hundreds of civilians and soldiers farm 5 hectares of customary land provided for them by the chief of the Itara area, a vast stretch of fertile land cultivated only by a few peasants. "This communal land thus allows the military to join together with civilians to work the land, sow maize, groundnuts and manioc and hoe the earth to protect the fruits of their labour from weeds and inclement weather", said the head of the Itara administrative post.

"The committee chose the community land to try out a joint activity between the army and the population it is bound to serve," explained the coordinator of ECC-Meru, Dismas Kyanza. Indeed, in the last few months, tensions have decreased, as Dieudonné Matumaini, known as "Japonais" testifies: "We live as brothers with the soldiers who come from elsewhere and don't know our dialects. After working in the field, we try to shoot the breeze over a bottle of beer." Other peasants add that they go for a stroll together in the evening, which would have been unimaginable only a few months ago.

According to Colonel Alphonse Panzu, commander of the 8th integrated brigade, trust in the military is noticeably returning. Military authorities have noted that rapes, thefts and robberies have stopped occurring in Luvungi since the community field was launched. "It has been an honour to be part of the farming project. I feel genuinely useful and respected," said Sergeant Alonga Boni. To move forward, "we now need the understanding and forgiveness of all," implored Colonel Panzu.

The head of the Itara post added that the other districts along the Bukavu-Uvira road, which are still subjected to military raids and barricades, envy the experience of those living in Luvingi.

Tomorrow is a new and better day

Civil azali bilanga ya soda (civilians are the field which the military uses as it pleases) remains, too often, the motto of the military. "Along with the restructuring of the army which is now thorough and careful when recruiting, we expect to see a new spirit among the law enforcement community, oriented towards civilian protection," hopes Colonel Alphonse Panzu.

Human rights organisations are hoping that this long-awaited reorganisation will address the concerns of the Congolese people whose rights are regularly violated by soldiers. SFCG has therefore embarked on the project *Lobi mokolo ya siki* (Tomorrow is a new and better day). Its director, Lena Slachmuijlder, says that the new army must have an humane attitude and appearance towards the population.

The same experiment has just begun with the 11th integrated brigade in Nyangezi, thirty miles to the south of Bukavu. Further south, towards Baraka, more than a dozen kilometres of the road have been repaired jointly by civilians and military.

Each gathering attracts more people because everyone is benefiting. Nyota Furaha, a farmer, is convinced of the project's value, saying, "we will do everything to keep intact the trust that has returned between civilians and the military."

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