

Rwanda on Friday received 360 of its citizens who were held for years by the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) rebel group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in a coordinated repatriation effort with the United Nations refugee agency.

The returnees — including men, women and children — crossed into Rwanda through the main Rubavu border post in the morning. The operation is part of a broader initiative to bring back more than 2,500 Rwandans who had been held in rebel-controlled areas of eastern Congo.

“These are not refugees, they are Rwandans who were held hostage,” said Rubavu District Mayor Prosper Mulindwa. “They are returning home voluntarily and are being temporarily hosted at Kijote Transit Center to help ease their reintegration.”

The returnees underwent health screening and identity checks at the border before being transported by bus to the Kijote facility in Nyabihu District. While there, they will receive food, shelter and psychosocial support, officials said.



The FDLR, formed by remnants of the militia that carried out the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, has long operated in eastern Congo, where it has kidnapped and indoctrinated Rwandan civilians — often preventing them from returning home through threats and misinformation.

Among the returnees was Claudine Mutoni, 20, who was born in Congo and described harrowing experiences under FDLR control.

“They raped women and tortured men. We were forced to work under terrible conditions,” Mutoni said. “But the way we’ve been welcomed gives us hope for a better life.”

Officials said some children showed signs of malnutrition and are being assessed by medical personnel at the center.

Mulindwa emphasized that the government is working to ensure a smooth reintegration process. The Ministry in charge of Emergency Management (MINEMA) will provide financial support — \$148 for each adult, \$133 per child, and Rwandan francs equivalent to about \$30 per person to help with resettlement.

"Every Rwandan has the right to live anywhere in this country. Even those who are unsure of their exact origins will be helped to reconnect with their communities," Mulindwa said. "They are not a threat as they are coming home to contribute to nation-building."

Returnees will be linked with national programs, including health insurance, community development initiatives and local governance structures.

More than 2,000 others remain at a temporary facility in Goma, eastern DRC, and are expected to return in phases, according to officials from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the Rwandan government.