

Nshimiyimana Donatien, gazes across the mist-covered hills of Muko Sector, Musanze District in the Rwanda's Northern Province where Mutobo Demobilisation and Reintegration Centre rises quietly. His scarred, calloused hands rest on his lap, his voice is steady, yet distant.

"They told us we were liberating Rwanda," he says. "But we were not soldiers. We were prisoners."

Nshimiyimana is one of over 1,200 Rwandans repatriated in May and June 2025 from the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) after being held captive for years, even decades by the rebel group called Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a group accused of having perpetrated the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994.



Nshimiyimana Donatien returned to Rwanda after years in DRC's jungles

He fled Rwanda in 1994 after the genocide against the Tutsi. For him and many others like him, "home" became an unfamiliar concept. "We were trained to believe that we would be killed if we went back."

In mid-May 2025, some returnees crossed back into Rwanda through formal routes in Rusizi and Nyabihu in western Rwanda. Processed in two batches on 17 and 19, May 2025. During this period 1,156 returnees received transit support, including food, shelter, basic health screenings, and a reintegration package, roughly \$188 for adults, \$113 for children, three months of food and subscribed into Community-Based Health Insurance (Mutuelle de Santé).

But reintegration meant more than essentials. At Mutobo Centre, a three-month rehabilitation program for over 13,000 former fighters and civilians since 2001, returnees receive trauma counseling, civic education, and vocational training in tailoring, mechanics, agriculture, and carpentry.

"Mutobo is not a prison," says retired Major Cyprien Mudeyi, who has led the center for seven years. "It's a place of recovery. Our role is to help them unlearn that fear and rediscover who they are as both Rwandans and human beings."

Despite these efforts, many bear deep psychological scars, indelible layers of trauma born from displacement, identity loss, guilt, and social disconnection.

Clinical psychologist Dr. Samuel Habimana of the Rwanda Resilience and Grounding Organization notes high prevalence of PTSD, anxiety, depression, and survivor's guilt among returnees. "For some, even a simple noise or sleeping in a bed can trigger panic" he emphasized.



The youngest are especially vulnerable. Many were forcibly recruited as child soldiers or born in camps to mothers who survived sexual violence. They arrive without identity documents, memories of normalcy, or a clear sense of belonging.

Take Chantal Uwitonze, now 27. She lost both parents during a militia raid and spent her youth serving as a cook and porter, enduring rape only to give birth at 19 in a thatched bush tent. "Her child never saw a classroom," she narrates. "He learned to listen to gunfire before he could speak." Now, Chantal trains in sewing, her son attend pre-primary school and for the first time, she has a locked door and a mattress to sleep on. "We don't have to hide anymore," she says.

In Rutsiro District, Pierre Rukundo returned after two decades in the jungle. As a teenager, he was forced into militia service: "I knew how to clean a rifle before I learned how to count." Now, he works as a metal fabricator alongside fellow returnees in a cooperative supported by Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (RDRC), Rwanda Cooperative Agency, and the Reserve Force, as part of over 120 new cooperatives launched nationwide in May.

Still, stigma remains. "Some people said I was a killer," Rukundo admits. "Others thought I came to spy."

Valérie Nyirahabineza, Chairperson of the RDRC, recognizes these tensions: "Reintegration does not mean impunity. Anyone suspected of crimes is investigated. But many returnees were victims of conflict, manipulation, and trauma. Our duty is to give them a chance."

Community healing efforts, dialogues, peer mediation, cultural events aim to restore social bonds. Yet acceptance varies: some villages welcome returnees warmly, others remain wary.



Meanwhile, threats persist across the border: a UN Security Council report in May

2025 estimates the FDLR's strength at 7,000 to 10,000 fighters stronger than previously thought with ongoing recruitment and propaganda campaigns keeping the lies alive.

"The lies that kept people in the forest are still there," warns Dr. Samuel Habimana. "To change that, we must fight with patient and persistent truth."

For Rwanda, the return of over 1,200 citizens is a humanitarian milestone but also a test of resilience and unity. The government's multi-agency approach blends justice, rehabilitation, and reconciliation in a delicate experiment in post-conflict recovery.

"We are one people," says Nyirahabineza. "We do not forget the past. But by embracing those who were lost to it, we shape a different future."

For Nshimiyimana, Uwitonze, Rukundo and many others the journey is far from over. But for the first time in years, they are walking forward.