

Rwanda to slash troop numbers to save money

AFP, September 23, 1997

KIGALI, Sept 23 (AFP) - Rwanda has mounted a huge demobilisation programme to slash defence spending and to help child soldiers return to civilian life, authorities said Tuesday.

Ephraim Kabaija, a presidency aide and head of Rwanda's demobilisation committee, said the security situation did not warrant so much money - an estimated 34 percent of the budget - being spent on the armed forces.

"We can't retain the army at its present level," he told AFP, "because it (was) prepared for particular purposes."

Military spending will be reduced to 20 percent of the national budget by the end of next year, he said.

The committee estimates that the army had 50,000 soldiers in 1994, the year when Hutu extremists killed more than half a million Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

The then-Rwandan army, the FAR, was eventually defeated by the

Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Army (APR).

Former FAR troops and Interahamwe Hutu militia forces continue to launch attacks notably in the northwest of the country, but Kabaija said that such "problems can be better handled by fewer soldiers if they are well trained and better equipped."

In the first phase of demobilisation, running to December next year, 5,000 APR troops will be demobilised, and 12,000 ex-FAR soldiers and 2,500 so-called child soldiers will receive assistance to return to civilian life.

The second phase, running until December 2000, concerns 10,000 APR troops and 28,000 ex-FAR.

The demobilisation programme will cost an estimated 39 million dollars and will be co-financed by international aid, Kabaija added.

In July, Deputy President and Defence Minister Paul Kagame, the strongman of the government, went to South Africa to ask for the lifting

of an arms embargo and said he wanted to purchase light weapons. rocket-launchers. Rwanda has also recently reportedly acquired two MI-

An informed source then said the request concerned semi-automatic weapons and mobile 24 attack helicopters, either hired or bought from a former Soviet republic. dla/at/km/gd/nb