

Kenya continues work of re-integrating returning al-Shabaab recruits

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NAIROBI, Kenya (RNS) In eight months of offering amnesty to former combatants who had joined Somalia's al-Shabaab militant group, Kenya has welcomed the return of 700 citizens.

The group has attacked churches, malls, and government institutions.

The return of the Kenya nationals was reported by the Kenyan government, the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, and the International Organization for Migration.

"They will undergo rehabilitation, before being re-integrated into the community," said Hassan Ole Naado, deputy general of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims.

Some of [the returning al-Shabaab recruits](#) quit the militant group on their own; others took advantage of the amnesty the government offered after the Garissa University College massacre in April, in which al-Shabaab gunmen killed 148 people—mostly Christian students—and wounded 79.

In September 2013, al-Shabaab attacked the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, killing over 60 people.

Kenya has been targeted by al-Shabaab largely because it shares a long border with Somalia. In addition, Kenya is one of the biggest contributors to African Union troops in Somalia.

"It is an excellent opportunity for the government to use the returnees as seeds of peace to counter al-Shabaab's narrative," Ole Naado said. "They have first-hand experience."

Some Christian leaders tentatively have welcomed the returnees, while warning that the group was still recruiting from Kenya.

Wilybird Lagho, secretary of the Mombasa Roman Catholic archdiocese, said religious leaders will need to treat the matter with caution.

“It is the first step, but there has to be a lot calculations when dealing with them,” Lagho said. “We need to establish if their loyalty is with the community, the government, or the extremists.”

At the same time, he said this is a chance for Kenya to get the facts right about al-Shabaab.

For several years, the extremists have recruited heavily in Kenya and the returning nationals are just a drop in the ocean, said Wellington Mutiso, head of Baptist churches in Kenya.

“I think there are thousands who have been fighting in Somalia,” Mutiso said. “They must be persuaded to return home, as long as there are clear programs to rehabilitate and monitor returnees over time.”