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APOPO de-mining project for replication

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A PROJECT that involves training of rats to sniff and detect landmines and other explosives being undertaken by the Morogoro-based Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA) will be presented at the Great Lakes summit slated for Nairobi, Kenya this September for possible adoption by member states.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Dr Asha-Rose Migiro, told the 'Daily News' at the weekend that the rats trained under Apopo Project have proved very useful in de-mining activities and were cost effective.

The project, according to the minister, has already been endorsed by the Regional Council of Ministers and was awaiting the presidents' endorsement.

She said that the trained rats would be used to detect landmines in the member states that experience such problems.

Dr Migiro said the Apopo project was more effective than the previous de-mining approaches. She expressed optimism that the Heads of State and Government would adopt it.

A member of the regional technical thematic task force on Peace and Security and Coordinator of the training, Dr Charles Muzanila, said a study on sniffer rats that were assigned to Mozambique showed that the rodents were remarkably useful in de-mining activities.

Dr Muzanila who works with the Tanzania People's Defence Forces (TPDF) said that following their performance in Mozambique, the task force recommended for the SUA trained rats to be used in de-mining activities in the Great Lake Region country with such problems.

"A report to this effect was presented and discussed during the Council of Ministers' meetings held in Kigali, Luanda and Lusaka and finally endorsed," he said.

APOPO is one of the four projects under the regional programme of action for peace and security.

The other projects include Disarmament and Repatriation of Armed groups in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Disarmament and Promotion of Development in Zone Three and Management of Border Zones and Human Security.

SUA started deploying the sniffer rats to various provinces in Mozambique in 2003 where reports show that the country's years of post-independence

civil war left over a million landmines. The rats were officially licensed by the National De-Mining Institute (IND) of Mozambique to detect mines. The tests were conducted in Shimoyo, Manica Province under the supervision of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian De-Mining (GICHD) which drew rules and standards. GICHD is an independent foundation supported by 18 governments. It supports humanitarian mine action through operational assistance, research and support for implementation of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention.

The project is operated jointly by SUA and the Belgium research organization (APOPO) which mooted the idea of using rats for detecting landmines through a search for a cheap and efficient mine detector tool. The rats are able to detect both metal and plastic landmines.

Three rats known in Kiswahili as 'panya buku' were firstly found by researchers in lower parts of Uluguru Mountains. The breed which was picked because of its comparatively long life span of eight years is also found in several other countries in sub-Saharan region.

Because of its light weight, a rat can safely tread on a landmine as it takes between 10 and 15 kilogrammes for the device to detonate. The training takes between six and ten months and takes 20 minutes daily except for Saturdays and Sundays plus public holidays

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