
[Uganda: The Batwa issue declaration calling for their rights to be recognized](#)

The Batwa (often described as “pygmies”) are widely regarded as the original forest-dwelling inhabitants of the Equatorial forest in the Great Lakes Region comprising Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Uganda, they lived in the forest of the Mufumbira Mountains in the South West. They were hunter-gatherers that relied on the forests for their livelihood and found in the forests the sustenance for their spiritual and social life.

In the 1930’s, the Batwa’s lands were declared forest and game reserves by the British colonial power, which implied the Batwa began to have restricted access to their own land, though the forest continued to be economically and culturally important to them.

In 1991, and without the Batwa’s participation, those forest reserves became national parks along the colonial and neo-colonial construct of “Fortress Conservation”: Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and Echuya Central Forest Reserve. The circle around the Batwa was closed: they were banned from their traditional forest activities and displaced from their lands, receiving little or no compensation at all. At present, almost half remain landless (squatting on others’ lands and working for non-Batwa masters in bonded labour agreements) and almost all live in absolute poverty. They have poorer levels of health care, education and employment than their ethnic neighbours.

In a recent Declaration (13 February 2009) submitted to the Ugandan Government and signed by 41 Batwa community representatives of five districts of South West Uganda, they state that since that time they are “homeless, landless and one of the poorest and most marginalised communities in Uganda”. In their declaration, they add that “because we are destitute, we depend on casual labour for survival and erect temporary shelter on land belonging to other communities around us. We are denied an opportunity to live a dignified life and contribute to national development like other citizens of Uganda contrary to International Human Rights Standards and the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda”. Some 6700 Batwa live in Uganda.

As one Batwa representative expressed at the recent meeting that produced the declaration, “Why is it that animals are guarded by guns and yet we the people are suffering? We have been voting but are we citizens of this country?”

A press release from the United Organisation for Batwa Development in Uganda (UOBDU) regarding the Batwa’s declaration, describes the sad and unfair destitution of an original people that used to live since time immemorial in coexistence with the environment: “The Batwa temporarily camp on other people’s land in Kisoro, Kabale, Kanungu, Mbarara and Masaka. They offer daily casual labour in exchange for food. Where this condition is breached, the consequence is expulsion from the individual’s land. The Mutwa [Batwa] woman is limited to receiving food for her labour and not even enough food to feed her infant children. She is also compelled to divert her older children from school to provide labour.”

The Batwa have raised a basic demand of justice: “Conscious that all human beings are equal and entitled to all rights and freedoms without distinction of any kind all human beings deserve to be treated with dignity and respect”. They remind the government that it is obliged by Constitutional provisions “to institute an effective machinery to deal with any hazard or situation resulting in general displacement of people or serious disruption of their livelihood” –which is the situation that they are confronting.

In their declaration, the Batwa claim respect to their “fundamental right to our ancestral lands” and that -pending the resolution of their land claims- “the government should provide alternative land” for their resettlement. At the same time, they demand that “since the forest forms the basis of our cultural and spiritual heritage, the government should allow us access the forest for purposes of preserving our cultural values.”

As the UOBDU press release states, “The declaration of the Batwa, now submitted to the Ugandan Government, will spearhead their strategy for their continuing struggle for their rights to be recognised. We strongly recommend that the Government pay attention to the plight of the Batwa people and integrate them into the national development efforts of Uganda. The Batwa are deprived of their access to their forests and most are landless. The Ugandan Government has obligations under international law.” It is now time for the government to act and repair a long standing injustice.

Article based on UOBDU press release of February 23, 2009, at http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/africa/uganda_batwa_declaration_press_rel_feb09_eng.pdf, disseminated by Amarantha Pike, e-mail: amarantha@forestpeoples.org, and Batwa Declaration at http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/africa/uganda_batwa_declaration_feb09_eng.pdf