
Congo, Democratic Republic: Mbuti forest peoples' survival threatened

The total number of hunter-gatherer Mbuti 'Pygmies' who live in the Ituri tropical forest is not known, although it has been estimated at 30,000 occupying 50% of the 37,860 sq km of Mambasa. Their existence is already extremely fragile: their land rights are not recognised either in law or in the customary rights systems of neighbouring peoples, and the authorities of the 13,000 sq km Okapi Wildlife Reserve no longer permit them to hunt large game. Instead, they survive by hunting small animals and bartering labour, firewood and game with the surrounding Bantu in exchange for food.

The forest, and therefore the Mbuti's food supply, is under increasing threat from the rapidly spreading commercial plantations of Ugandan timber companies and the increasing number of coltan mines (coltan is an important ingredient in the manufacturing of capacitors, which regulate voltage and store energy in mobile phones).

Although relations between the Mbuti hunter-gatherers and the traditional Bila fisher-farmers (who practice shifting cultivation) are generally good and involve sustainable forest use, the forest has also been under increasing pressure from incoming gold panners. This has involved incomers clearing the forest to create large permanent fields to grow produce to sell to the gold panners at exorbitant prices, upsetting both the local economy, local ecology and traditional livelihood of the Mbuti, thus exposing them to vulnerable conditions.

To add to their plight, the Ugandan-backed rebel groups Congolese Liberation Movement (MLC) and Congolese Rally for Democracy-National (RCD-N) have been fiercely harassing the Mbuti with acts of terrorism including cases of execution, rape, abduction, torture and even cannibalism and forced cannibalism. In the past months tens of thousands of civilians have fled before an advance by the MLC, RCD-N and the Union of Congolese Patriots, who are hoping to win control of mineral resources including coltan, gold and diamonds. More than 10,000 refugees from Ituri have crossed the border into Uganda, and a reported 100,000 people have taken refuge in Beni. Recent reports suggest at least 3000 "Pygmies" have fled the forest ("for the first time in ages" according to the UN Mission in Democratic Republic of Congo-MONUC). A group of at least 1000 have sought shelter in the village of Mangina, while other camps of the displaced are located between Mambasa to Beni. The poor security situation has prevented humanitarian agencies from working in Ituri, leaving the Mbuti without adequate food, shelter or security.

The Mbuti are therefore in much need of support. They are suffering from a civil war, total alien to them, resulting in innumerable human rights violations; their territorial rights to a forest which is clearly their ancestral home are not recognized; their food supply is curtailed by conservation programmes that deny them access to their normal sources of protein; their territory is being invaded by soldiers, coltan and gold miners and agriculturalists from other areas; their diverse tropical forest is being substituted by monoculture tree plantations. Something needs to be done, and fast!

By Lucy Mulvagh, FPP, e-mail: lucy@fppwrm.gn.apc.org, <http://forestpeoples.gn.apc.org> For more information on the situation in Ituri, readers can consult the following sources: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: <http://www.irinnews.org> , ReliefWeb:

<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf>

Refugees International, 'Forgotten People: In the Ituri District of the Democratic Republic of the Congo', 15 January 2003,

<http://www.refugeesinternational.org/cgi-bin/ri/other?occ=00568&spotlight=1>