
Rwanda: The un-reported plight of the Batwa

The World Bank first and the Hutu-Tutsi civil war later have led the Batwa pigmies to near extinction and years of suffering, without this being reported by the world mass media.

In 1967 the World Bank and the European Fund started to implement a project of cattle raising and potato production in the forests occupied by the Batwa. They were expelled from their forest without explanation nor compensation of any kind. In 1982 the World Bank considered that only 5,000 hectares of these forests should be protected, while the rest was to be converted to cattle raising, pine plantations and military objectives. During the whole process the Batwa were completely ignored by the Bank's "experts". As a result, the Batwa were deprived of their livelihoods and the Gishwati forest shrunk to a mere 3800 hectares.

The already serious problems that the Batwa were facing dramatically increased during the 1990-1994 Hutu-Tutsi war, where they suffered attacks from both sides. Before 1994, the Batwa population was estimated in some 30000 people and 10000 -a third- were killed during a confrontation in which they did not take part. In spite of this, they were never mentioned in the mass media's coverage of the war. The country's forests also suffered and it is estimated that some 15000 hectares of forests were destroyed, while a further 35000 hectares were seriously degraded during the war.

A 61-year old Batwa says: "We were chased out of our forest, which was our father because it provided us with food through gathering and hunting ... The State chased us out of the forest and we had to settle in the fringes, where we die of starvation. All the development projects that were carried out in Gishwati forest have done nothing for us and no Batwa has even received the benefit of a job."

During all these years, the World Bank has been recognizing its past errors and has developed a number of policies regarding the protection of forests and forest peoples' rights. Although these are positive developments, they are useless for the Batwa unless the Bank commits itself to redress its past errors and works out a solution for them, whose plight began with a World Bank project. It may not be a bureaucratic necessity, but it certainly is a moral obligation.

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