



PRESS RELEASE

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Ugandan Batwa issue declaration calling for their rights to be recognised

A declaration demanding that land be provided for the resettlement of the Batwa people has been submitted to the Ugandan Government. The declaration, signed by 41 Batwa Community Representatives of five districts of South West Uganda, also states that the Ugandan Government should allow the Batwa access to the Forest so that their cultural values can be preserved. In addition it asserts that the Government should provide adequate education and health services to the Batwa. The declaration was submitted to the Minister for Gender and Culture of the Ugandan Government, who has promised that it will also be presented to the Speaker of Parliament, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Cabinet Minister for Gender, Labour and Social Development.

The declaration further states that the Batwa, the original inhabitants of the Equatorial Forest in the Great Lakes Region comprising of Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, have a fundamental right to their ancestral lands and that they are entitled to preferential access to sustainable resources.

The Batwa are a hunter-gatherer community that derived their livelihood and practised their culture in the forests of South West Uganda. In the 1990s these forest reserves were designated as Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park and Echuya Central Forest Reserve. The Batwa were banned from their traditional forest activities and displaced from their lands. As one Batwa representative lamented at the recent workshop 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?'

The Batwa are homeless, landless and one of the poorest and most marginalised communities in Uganda, numbering some 6,700 people. The majority of Ugandan Batwa suffer severe isolation, discrimination and socioeconomic exclusion. Their customary rights have not been recognised in Uganda and they have received little or no compensation for their losses. 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

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 woman is limited to food for her labour and not enough food to feed her infant children. She is also compelled to divert her older children from school to provide labour. A Mutwa child is discouraged from going to school by pupils who make fun of them and subject them to ridicule. The men have no means to fend for their families and out of frustration have resorted to drug and alcohol abuse.

The Batwa cannot contribute to national development denying them an opportunity to meet their Constitutional obligation. They are also denied an opportunity to benefit from what accrues to them as citizens of Uganda in addition to enjoyment of their rights and constitutional entitlement.

In the Declaration the Batwa state:

'We are homeless, landless and one of the poorest and most marginalised communities in Uganda. 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.

National Objective and Directive Principles of State Policy 23, among other Constitutional provisions, obligates Government to institute an effective machinery to deal with any hazard or situation resulting in general displacement of people or serious disruption of their livelihood.'

Penninah Zaninka, Coordinator of UOBDU, said:

'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. We want to work with the Government to help them meet these obligations.'

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