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Réseau Initiative for Equality

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Congolese and International Human Rights Groups Denounce Convictions of Indigenous Land Rights Advocates in DRC; File Legal Appeal

Congolese and international human rights groups have denounced the convictions and lengthy prison sentences of eight indigenous Batwa land rights advocates at Kahuzi Biega National Park in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In early February, six Batwa men were each sentenced to 15 years in prison, and two Batwa women to 1 year each. They had attempted to return to their traditional lands, which had been taken to expand the park, after years of unsuccessful negotiations left them without any lands or other means of survival.

“We denounce the practice of coercive conservation as it is currently being practiced in Kahuzi-Biega National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, demand recognition of the historic injustice experienced by the Batwa people expelled from PNKB, and call for changing the model of park management to one of collaboration with indigenous peoples and local communities, not coercion,” reads the Declaration of Solidarity, currently being circulated by Batwa rights organizations in DRC and international human rights organizations including *Amnesty International*, *Forest Peoples Programme* and *Minority Rights Group International*.

A legal appeal seeking to overturn the convictions has been filed by members of *Reseau Initiative for Equality* (RIFE), a regional network of 18 indigenous rights groups in DRC and neighboring countries. They argue that the 1-day trial in which the Batwa defendants were convicted and sentenced violated many of the legal and procedural requirements for due process.

See the [Declaration here](#) for details of the case, along with background on the land rights conflict at Kahuzi Biega National Park.

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