



A Cry of Alarm: Batwa People Under Genocidal Assault

The Batwa people of Central and Eastern Africa are among the most endangered peoples on earth. At the very bottom of the social hierarchy across the African Great Lakes Region and Congo Basin, they suffer from abject poverty and discrimination by governments and neighboring communities. As indigenous hunting and gathering peoples, they hold the traditional land rights to one of the most resource-rich regions in the world, yet they frequently lack access to food, health care, education, employment, safety and security. They have little or no political influence, and are often treated as sub-human.

Worse yet, they are now under assault as international interests, regional militias and neighboring tribes vie for access to lands for agriculture, timber, hydro-power, minerals, and nature reserves for eco-tourism. In the early 2000's, thousands of Batwa people are estimated to have been killed by rebel militias in an ethnic cleansing drive in the Ituri region of northeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The leader of the military force responsible, Jean-Pierre Bemba, was convicted of war crimes in 2016, only to have his conviction overturned in 2018 on the grounds that he could not be held responsible for what his men did.



Now, after a 13-year lull, the genocidal killings are starting up again, this time in southeastern DRC. In Tanganyika Province (ex-Katanga), our investigation shows that between 2015-2018, over 1,900 Batwa have been killed in large-scale massacres accompanied by mass rapes, mutilations, and the fleeing of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs). In one horrific night, a massacre near Moba on 13-14 January 2017 killed an estimated 600 Indigenous Batwa people. Some 1,600 women and girls were raped during the violent onslaught, with large numbers dying from the brutality and lack of medical care. To date, neither the DRC government nor the UN's peace-keeping force in DRC has admitted that this mass atrocity took place, and it has never been covered by the news media. [You can see RIFE's report on this genocide here.](#)

Many other smaller but similar events have taken place, including the killing of 189 Batwa on 04 July 2017 at an IDP camp outside the provincial capital of Kalemie, Tanganyika Province. Again, no media coverage, no government acknowledgement, and no medical and psycho-social assistance has been forthcoming. There are currently a documented half-million displaced persons who have fled this conflict in Tanganyika Province, including both Batwa and Bantu (non-Batwa) people.

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In another ongoing crisis in Sud-Kivu, just to the north of Tanganyika Province in DRC, Batwa communities were expelled from their lands to make way for a large-scale nature reserve called Kahuzi Biega National Park. Despite lip service by the Western interests supporting this nature reserve, including WWF, the German government and USAID, no provisions were made for the Batwa's survival and subsistence outside the park boundaries. When individuals return home to obtain medicinal plants or other forest resources, they are shot as poachers by the park guards. This crisis reached a critical point in 2019, after a group of Batwa returned to the park. They cite the lack of alternatives for survival, and have declared that they are prepared to die for their right to return.



Meanwhile, the social breakdown caused by this slow-motion genocide is destroying the culture and indigenous knowledge of the people, as they struggle to survive in the face of displacement, loss of lands, starvation, alcoholism, and rampant sexual fetishization of Batwa women by others.

The Batwa are on the brink of catastrophe. They need a national, regional and global mobilization.

Who are the Batwa and Why Do They Matter? The Batwa¹ are considered by many anthropologists and population biologists to be among the most ancient existing people on earth. They lived as hunter-gatherers in the Congo Basin forests of Central Africa for tens of thousands of years, coexisting without conflict, overpopulation or species extinction. Some 4,000 years ago, Bantu agriculturalists from West Africa began gradually spreading to the east and south, reaching what is now Eastern DRC by around 300 AD². Although they first relied on the hospitality of the indigenous Batwa hunter-gatherers to help them adapt to the new region, eventually the Bantu agriculturalists came to dominate the Batwa, establishing serf-like relationships in which the Batwa hunted for them and sometimes helped in the fields or as domestic servants, in return for certain agricultural goods.

The advent of brutal European colonialism and slavery in the 1800's locked in the pattern of dominance and exploitation, and led to the globalized extractive economy we see today. Once roads, land grabs, timber harvest and mining destroyed the forests as a place of refuge for the Batwa, the long-standing pattern of socio-economic and political inequality and domination paved the way for today's atrocities.

Currently, the majority of Batwa live in abject poverty, either in small rural villages or in the outskirts of urban areas. Malnutrition and outright starvation are common. Although most Batwa are uneducated and illiterate, a small but growing number of educated, literate and computer-

¹ Formerly called "Pygmies" by outsiders, they prefer to go by their local names, including Batwa, Twa, Bambuti, Mbuti, Bayaka, Baka and many others. "Batwa" is a general designation agreed upon by our regional network.

² Vansina. 1990. Paths in the Rainforests. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press; p. 51.

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savvy Batwa men and women are actively involved in promoting a cultural renaissance, political advocacy, and development initiatives for their communities (see page 4 below).



The Batwa's situation is a crisis, not just for the Batwa themselves but also for the world. As perhaps the oldest existing people, humankind has much to learn from the Batwa about human nature. Even more importantly, the Batwa's traditional culture provides the one of the best role models we have for egalitarian social and economic relationships, as well as respect for and harmony with nature. Finally, the current climate crisis has much to do with the loss of the world's two largest tropical forests – the South American Amazon, and the Congo Basin, which has been protected for millennia by the Batwa.

The world is on the brink of catastrophe. We need the Batwa's help.

Why the Massacres in Tanganyika Province Now? This is the culmination of a perfect storm of interacting circumstances. The predisposing conditions have been building over many centuries: invasion by agriculturalists and colonialists; serfdom and slavery; the clash of hunter-gatherer cultures with agricultural and then industrial cultures; discrimination and intergenerational trauma; social breakdown and loss of traditional culture; hopelessness.

Since the 1960s, a heightened post-colonial danger has emerged, as global extractive industries began grabbing all the land, hydro-power, timber and minerals they could get, often interfering in national politics to ensure a supportive regime was in place. This in turn led to the impoverishment and desperation of the general populace, along with the militarization of politics. Beginning with the 1994 Rwandan genocide, militias have been fighting for control of resources across the region, to increase both their wealth and their political power. Two major regional wars near the turn of the millennium led to the loss of 6 million lives, and the traumatization and militarization of nearly every community. [See this excellent overview](#) on how resource exploitation led to the violence.

Tanganyika Province is one of the most mineral-rich regions on earth. Under the principle of "divide and conquer", it often suits the DRC government to allow (or even help) the populace to kill each other while the major mining interests (and the political and economic elites who collaborate with them) get rich. RIFE's investigation into the genocide against the Batwa delved into the causes with detailed interviews, concluding that all the above factors are at play in a tangled and historically contingent web of cause and effect.

In other words, to stop the ongoing tragedy requires addressing all the abuses, from local discrimination and sexual fetishization, through extreme poverty and social breakdown on all sides, to the DRC's corrupt authoritarian kleptocracy which colludes with international mining interests and diverts the profits to private off-shore tax havens, thus impoverishing the entire country.



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What Can Be Done to Protect and Empower the Batwa Peoples? We have strategies at the local/national/regional level, and at the international level. *Réseau Initiative for Equality* (RIfE) is a formal network of 18 Batwa rights organizations in the DRC, Burundi and Rwanda. RIfE works to facilitate the empowerment of Indigenous peoples in the African Great Lakes region; to promote human rights, knowledge, social cohesion and peace; and to ensure access to justice, socio-economic services, and rights to land and natural resources. It is governed by a 7-member Coordinating Committee, elected annually, and collaborates informally with many other Batwa rights groups and Batwa communities across the region. Current activities include:

- grassroots organizing & rapid response network of Batwa communities and rights groups
- Field Hearings to take input and analysis from Batwa communities
- media and public awareness campaign directed at reducing discrimination
- supporting recovery of ethnic and cultural identity and practices
- "know your rights" campaign in Batwa communities
- Batwa women's rights and gender role discussion groups
- peace-building dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms between Batwa and Bantu
- participatory mapping of traditional lands and monitoring of land and resource grabs,
- advocating for right of return and/or compensation
- monitoring massacres, atrocities, and rights violations and advocating on behalf of victims
- promoting access to means of subsistence; training to ensure food security
- promoting access to appropriate housing, education and health care

The *International Batwa Support Committee* (IBSC) consists of IfE network members around the world who are particularly committed to backing up RIfE with international strategies and activities. IBSC works on international awareness and demands human rights interventions and protections through United Nations and other multilateral agencies. Current efforts include:

- publishing research & investigations on massacres; illicit flows of money; mining interests
- filing reports and requests for action with Human Rights Council and other rights bodies
- writing articles, op-eds and press releases to obtain media attention to the situation
- requesting agencies and governments to sign a Declaration pledging to fulfill mandates and to stop facilitating the abuses
- gathering support from well-known persons (e.g. The Elders) to promote this Declaration
- pursuing legal justice through regional and international commissions, tribunals and courts
- divestment campaign against international bad actors; boycotts of minerals products

We urgently need your advice, help, and support!

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³ We protect the anonymity of many of our local partners because their work puts them at grave risk.