

## RWANDA

The indigenous Batwa population of Rwanda is known by various names: ancient hunter-gatherers, Batwa, Pygmies, Potters, or the “historically marginalized population”. The Batwa live throughout the country and number between 33,000 and 35,000 people out of a total population of around 11,000,000, i.e. 0.3% of the population.<sup>1</sup> They have a distinct culture, often associated with their folkloric and traditional dance and the intonation of their specific language.

Prior to 1973 when national parks were created in Rwanda, the Batwa lived mainly from hunting and gathering in the territory’s natural forests. They were expelled from their ancestral lands with no warning, compensation or other means of subsistence and they now constitute the poorest and most marginalized ethnic group in Rwanda.

Their complete lack of representation in governance structures has been a great problem for the Batwa. However, Article 82, para 2 of the Rwandan Constitution, amended by revision no. 2 of 8 December 2005, stipulates that eight members of the Senate must be appointed by the President of the Republic, who shall also ensure representation of historically marginalized communities. However, at the moment the Batwa have only one representative in the Senate.

The Rwandese government still does not recognise the indigenous or minority identity of the Batwa and, in fact, all ethnic identification has been banned since the 1994 war and genocide, even though the government voted in favour of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Because of this unwillingness to identify people by ethnic group, there is no specific law in Rwanda to promote or protect Batwa rights.

**T**he situation of the Batwa in Rwanda continued to be a cause for great concern in 2011. Their major problems were a lack of land, a lack of employment and income opportunities, a lack of food, extremely poor housing and sanitation conditions, poor health, a lack of education, a lack of attention from local authori-



ties, a lack of access to justice and a lack of influence over the decision-making processes that affect their daily lives.

## Housing

The government programme to destroy traditional thatched huts and build modern houses for Batwa families continued in 2011. The authorities did not consult COPORWA before starting to destroy the Batwa huts. Most of the donors in Rwanda criticised the policy and programme implementation since, in many cases, it led to the destruction of traditional Batwa homes without any new modern

houses being constructed in their place, thus leading to complete homelessness and increased vulnerability on the part of the Batwa people. Due to pressure from donors and to the advocacy actions of the Batwa organisation, the *Communauté des Potiers du Rwanda* (COPORWA) and others, the Rwandan government had to stop destroying the traditional Batwa huts and put greater efforts into building sufficient modern houses for these people.

It is estimated that 80% of traditional Batwa huts have now been destroyed, and that around 70% of the Batwa have been provided with newly constructed houses. By the middle of 2011, the authorities started to consult COPORWA and they appointed a focal point who is now in charge of the problems of marginalised groups within MINALOC (Ministry of Local Administration).

## Education

Around 95% of Batwa children attend primary school, as the Government of Rwanda facilitates basic education; however, only around 45% of Batwa children are in secondary school and very few (5%) Batwa youth go on to study at university. In 2011, however, 11 Batwa youth completed their university studies, with 22 more continuing their studies into 2012.

## Universal Periodic Review of Rwanda

Rwanda was up for review during the tenth session of the UN Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), on 24 January 2011. Of the 73 recommendations made by states, one mentioned the Batwa and one related to indigenous peoples. Chile made a recommendation to “Adopt measures aimed at reducing poverty in the Batwa community and its full integration in society”. This recommendation enjoyed the support of Rwanda, which considered that it was already in the process of being implemented. On the other hand, the recommendation made by Malaysia to “Intensify measures to improve access by minority groups and indigenous people to basic social services, such as health, education, employment, and occupation” was immediately rejected by Rwanda, which considered it either not applicable or irrelevant.<sup>2</sup>

## UN expert reports on widespread discrimination of the Batwa

In January 2011, the UN Human Rights Council dispatched a senior expert to Rwanda on an eight-day fact-finding mission to examine the situation of the “different population groups reflecting the ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity in the country”.<sup>3</sup>

The independent expert on minority issues, Gay McDougall, visited Rwanda from January 31 to 7 February. In Rwanda she organised a press conference and visited different institutions and ministries. She also visited Batwa families in the field together with a COPORWA delegation. The outcome of the mission was a report to the United Nations and the Government of Rwanda recommending, in particular, that the problems of Batwa be addressed by ensuring that the education of Batwa is assured and facilitated, that they are represented in different institutions and that income-generating activities are increased as a way of reducing the extreme poverty in which they live. The report, which was presented to the General Assembly of the Human Rights Council on November 28, contains a section on the situation of the Batwa which summarizes the following:

*There are numerous communities in Rwanda that identify themselves as Batwa. The Government has categorized them as “historically marginalized people”. They currently live in conditions of great hardship and poverty on the margins of mainstream society. As a population group, they have extremely low levels of education and health care, live in dwellings that offer no protection from harsh climatic conditions and they are virtually absent from the public life of the country. They were removed from their ancestral forests without consent or compensation, face widespread discrimination, particularly in employment, and have no viable means of livelihood. While the Government has instituted assistance programmes, those programmes have failed to be effective for the Batwa as a whole.*<sup>4</sup>

COPORWA is now regularly invited to different important meetings organised by the Rwandan government, and different ministers visit COPORWA's office to find out how to improve the conditions of the Batwa population.

## **Roundtable meeting**

In June 2011, a roundtable meeting, organised by COPORWA, was held between the government, represented by the Ministry of Local Government, civil society, the Rwandan Human Rights Commission and international partners and donors such as IWGIA, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), the European Union, TROCAIRE and different embassies based in Kigali.

The roundtable meeting discussed the situation of the Batwa in general and specifically focused on housing and land, with regard to which strong criticism was voiced by civil society regarding the destruction of traditional Batwa huts by local authorities.

The meeting agreed that much still needs to be done in terms of improving the living conditions of the Batwa people. It was suggested by the Ministry of Local Government that an assessment study of the situation and needs of the Batwa – including issues of access and rights to land - should be carried out in partnership between the ministry and civil society, through which best practices could also be identified and the Batwa people themselves be empowered to identify their own solutions.

## **COPORWA activities in 2011**

COPORWA continued its activities in 2011, including advocacy and dialogue with the government, general awareness raising and assistance to Batwa communities, including:

- National awareness raising on the situation of the Batwa people through radio programmes;
- Protection of the rights of Batwa people in Nyaruguru District in the southern province of Rwanda, who were the victims of land confiscations and other violations;
- Organisation of a 16-day campaign against gender-based violence in Nyaruguru District;

- Training of 33 community workers in Nyaruguru District to focus on advocacy and monitoring/verification of whether the local authorities are carrying out activities/providing support to Batwa communities in terms of education, health, human rights and income-generating activities;
- Initiation of collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce and Trade, which donated six motorcycles and 20 bikes to help COPORWA's field staff work with Batwa people all over Rwanda;
- Supporting Batwa cooperatives in farming, pottery and the construction of bricks and roofs;
- Supporting Batwa youth in secondary schools, university and vocational training (sewing, carpentry and construction);
- Training Batwa communities, their leaders and local authorities in the fight against poverty. ○

## Notes and references

- 1 According to a socio-economic survey carried out in 2004 by CAURWA (Community of Indigenous Rwandans) now known as COPORWA (Community of Rwandan Potters) in collaboration with the Statistics Department of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning.
- 2 <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G11/117/93/PDF/G1111793.pdf?OpenElement>
- 3 [http://www.iwgja.org/news/search-news?news\\_id=98](http://www.iwgja.org/news/search-news?news_id=98)
- 4 See more on: [http://www.iwgja.org/news/search-news?news\\_id=442](http://www.iwgja.org/news/search-news?news_id=442)

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