

Submission by Society for Threatened Peoples

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Situation of Indigenous Peoples

1. Society of Threatened Peoples is deeply concerned about the situation of the indigenous people living in Gabon. Gabon covers an area of 26.767.000 km², 84.5% of the total land area is covered with forests. Until today there are 13 national parks established across the country. The forest serves the basis for the social structure, the culture, the history and the hunter and gatherer economy of the so called "Pygmies" who are threatened both by commercial farming, logging, conservation projects and discrimination.
2. Gabon is home for approximately 20.000 Baka (North), Babongo (South) and Bakoya (East) people. Because the term "pygmies" has negative connotations, they often call themselves "people of the forest", but "Pygmies" is still an established word. Every group has its own people, i.e. the Twa, Aka, Baka or Mbuti. All these different groups have diverse languages and hunting habits. Although they try to continue to live in the forests because they feel themselves as a part of it, many pygmies also live in settlements next to main roads and are in contact with Bantu farmers. They earn their wage as labourers on farms. Beside the destruction of their living space, traditional mechanisms of coping with tensions are destroyed and replaced by alcohol abuse and domestic violence, especially against women. The forest people are often not recognised as indigenous people and land rights are not recognised for gatherers and hunters (who they are). Through the loss of their land by logging and other problems, the danger of being exploited is immense because they got dependent on other goods. The neighbouring societies often do not see the pygmies as equal people as they are regarded as primitive. The mortality rate of the forest people is extremely high because their health is combined with their access to land. Before they lived in settlements where they used a food- sharing- system to counter malnutrition. While settled the rate of illness is high because of the density of population, they lack proper sanitation etc. Earlier the forest people never rested longer than some days at one place so that rubbish and dirt could not be aggregated. Mostly they do not have access to public health services because of discrimination, lack of money or IDs or simply because public services do not exist in these areas.

Economic development without respect to indigenous peoples rights

3. The Society for Threatened Peoples is observing with great concern the developments of logging in Gabon. It is one of the last countries where the forests are not yet cut but it is in danger to end up like its neighbouring countries where the deforestation is progressed. Some unique and endangered species live in the forests of Gabon which are found nowhere else in the world. Their living area is exposed to logging, too. The forests are living space for animals like Gorillas, Chimpanzees, forest elephants as well as human being like the pygmies. Through logging their lives and livelihood are in danger. Plans for dams and railways are another indicator for an acceleration of the exploitation of natural resources and will lead to illegal logging and mining.
4. Another very worrying fact is the discovery of huge natural resources deposits in the Gabonese forests: Many companies are applying for research and extraction permissions for logging. The coastal forests were provided for Gabonese companies but through sub-contracts (what is called "fermage") foreign firms work there now because the transfer of logging rights is poorly regulated by law. Additionally selective logging is a problem as well. This is just a precursor of it as it can be seen in countries like Brazil, Papua New Guinea or Indonesia: Where the logging firms cut just specific species like the Timber Okoumé tree it has an enormous negative impact on the environment because it is unsustainable. Under the disguise of "sustainable forest management" (SFM) this selective logging is a major source of carbon emissions and a primary driver of deforestation and destruction of indigenous societies. It could even derail the UN process to reduce deforestation and forest degradation. Even the softest form of deforestation (reduced impact logging → RIL) is harmful for the environment because by cutting of one tree damages or destroys six to ten other trees and producing 10-80 t of carbon / ha. The forest is four to eight times vulnerable to deforestation and vulnerable to fire, too. The regrowing trees are of less quality than the former ones. Selective logging affects the environment because of the concomitant road constructions. The length of logging roads with 13.400 km is longer than the german motorway network. These new roads open the former dense rainforests for wildlife hunters who now have easy access to animals. They poach and decimate the wildlife population which was not possible before. Besides the opening of the forests poses the threat of changing the forest into cash crop plantations, soil erosion and water pollution through chemicals. The primary forests disappear but logging companies do not invest in villages, schools or other public services. Logging is a typical mining operation: it means a low income for the country but high income for foreign companies. There are just a few and badly paid jobs because Gabon only exports raw materials.
5. With great concern, the Society for Threatened Peoples took note of the situation of the pygmies in Gabon who lose their living area. Nowadays they often live in permanent settlements to which they are not used to. Therefore they cannot handle the additional rubbish while the sanitary service is very poor. Malnutrition makes them vulnerable to illnesses like typhus, hepatitis, tuberculosis or leprosy. Jigger causes infections, too. Even if the forest people

get some medicaments the treatment poses a problem. When they receive medicaments they do not know how to store them well because they are not used to any reserves. Despite certain laws concerning the forests poor people and forest communities do not have access to the resources. In many cases the people do not know their rights and the national laws. All ethnic groups are represented in political positions but rarely pygmies. There is no specific governmental program concerning the forest people.

6. It is especially disconcerting that even though Gabon agreed to its own indigenous People's Plan as part of the Worldbank policy loan agreement for the Forest and Environment Sector Program, and voted in favour of the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, guaranteeing the right of indigenous peoples to their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) for any major project impacting on their way of life, they were in most cases not properly consulted, even less did they have a say in the realisation of these projects. They lack meaningful participation at the national level in the design of programmes, and at the local level, in the concrete projects such as the Belinga Project for mining and iron development that was leaded by China. The construction has commenced without the appropriate social and environmental procedures and would have caused serious negative impact to the environment through Mining, railways, a deep-water port and a dam flooding huge parts of the National park Irindo. Just because of a deeply committed Gabonese NGO called „Brainforest“ the revision of the contract could be achieved so that the conditions for Gabon and its people got better.
7. There is not a lot of widespread logging, but commercial selective logging is carried out all over the country. Nevertheless selective logging is the mildest form of logging, it poses a serious threat to the pygmies. Rates of outright deforestation have been very low: 13 national parks were established since 2002 and logging rates are only up to 0,1% per year., but most of the country has been affected by commercial logging. Virtually all the forests in the western third of the country have already been logged at least once, and most of the country's remaining forests are designated for exploitation by logging companies. The application of the national parks for indigenous groups is unclear. Gabon first recognised these people when it signed its own indigenous People's Plan in 2005. One year later a program to identify people without Identity- Cards was implemented. The vote for the UN- Declaration on the Rights of indigenous people was a further step towards indigenous rights. Now it is important that capacity building and the preparation for strengthened advocacy get started and supported by government. Since Gabon declares 11% of the national territory to reserves and since the sustainable exploitation of the forests is officially required in the national legislation, there is a positive development in environment protection. The export of raw wood was stopped in 2010 while the construction of a special economic zone for wood processing started. Environmental policy and lasting development have an important position in the national policy of Gabon. A role model function has Gabon in the elaboration of a plan for climate protection.

General human rights situation in Gabon

8. Thanks to its oil deposits Gabon is one of the richest African countries with a BIP of ca. 8.395 US- \$ / p.P. (2010) However the social indicators show a very different image: about 80% of the total population live under the poverty line while 1/3 live in extreme poverty conditions. More than 90% of the national BIP is used by only 10% of the population. Consequently, the income inequality is very high which explains why people live under the poverty line in a rich country like Gabon. Life expectancy on an averages is only 60 years. This is why Gabon's HDI ranks No. 106 in the UN- Human developing report 2011. Transparency International ranks Gabon at 106 out of 180 countries because corruption is still a big impediment of development. What's more, the freedom of speech and freedom of press is restricted, like the ranking of "reporters without borders" shows: Gabon is situated at the 101st place out of 179 in 2011, but there is a positive tendency. Once Marc Ona Essangui from the NGO "brainforest" has spoken about corruption and abuse of power in economy and government, now his actions are monitored by the government and is threat of imprisonment. In January 2008, Gabon banned 20 NGOs for carrying out their activities. Amnesty International reported that the death penalty was abolished in 2010. The prisons are still over-crowded and in bad conditions, arbitrary internments are not prohibited by law but still exist, like cases of torture. The police seems to be inefficient and corrupt, bribery and impunity are common. In general the circumstances in prison augmented.
9. Furthermore the economy, though Gabon is a rich country, is very vulnerable to external factors: 82% of the export revenue and 65% of the government revenue comes from mineral oil and oil products so they are highly dependant on the world market. Notwithstanding the economy grows, the growing population needs new jobs which are not many in the oil sector but the agricultural sector is not developed very well. As a consequence, Gabon's financial standing is ranked on place 80 out of 178 in 2011 because of its social and political framework. In 2008 Gabon cleared most of its debts and the trend is decreasing: 2011 the national adeptness accounted for only 20% of the national BIP.

Conclusion

10. All these developments showcase the tendency in Gabon, to give priority to economic growth at the expenses of indigenous peoples. Constitutional and international law guarantees for indigenous rights are violated by not regarding the pygmies' situation and by not confirming them. Most alarmingly, selective logging is a precursor of total logging, as it can be seen in other countries around the world. Therefore the current government of Gabon risks to contribute to the destruction of the cultural diversity and one of the richest eco system in terms of biological diversity, home to indigenous peoples and unique animal species whose survival depend on the rainforest. If the above illustrated developments continue, the survival of the indigenous peoples, their tradition and culture is at risk.
11. These trends make it impossible for indigenous peoples to determine their way of life, and disrespect their right to a life in dignity according to their culture and

tradition. Gabon does not give them sufficient means for meaningful participation in the formulation of national policies, and in concrete cases their right to free, prior and informed consent, or at least prior consultation is disregarded.

12. Nevertheless, Gabon is on a good way to positive change by protecting large areas of its land and signing contracts for strengthening indigenous peoples' rights. But the government must show greater interest in the implementation of these provisions protecting the rights of indigenous people who need special attention and support and must be aware of the dangerous impact selective logging has on its land. The government should make great efforts in fighting corruption and establish Good Governance.