

An Off-the-Record Genocide: Global Resource Extraction Economy Destroys DR Congo Indigenous Groups

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On April 27, 2017, a hapless cow wandered off-course during a seasonal cattle drive in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and ended up over the campfire of some Indigenous hunters. The traditional lands of these groups (Batwa and related groups) are routinely trampled by cattle, cut for old-growth timber, or grabbed for mineral resources including diamonds and coltan — generally illegally. As their wild game diminishes from these impacts, the Batwa have come to view cattle as fair game.

The cattle herders followed their cow's tracks, and upon learning her fate, agreed to share the meat with the Batwa. But when they returned to their village, a local self-appointed "defense militia" was infuriated, [returning to kill and mutilate](#) eight of the Batwa.

The global economy's demand for hard-to-obtain minerals and tropical timber, coupled with a long history of contempt and exploitation by neighboring tribes, have made these Batwa hunter-gatherers easy targets for land grabs and violence. Specifically targeted during a massive regional conflict to gain control over resources, in the early 2000s, an estimated 70,000 Batwa were tortured, killed and even [cannibalized](#) in northeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), according to American University's [Inventory of Conflict and Environment Case Studies](#).

There is only one word for the attempted eradication of an entire group of people through the wholesale slaughter of men, women and children, whatever the reason. That word is genocide.

The conflict is now heating up again, this time in southeastern DRC. Since September 2016, volunteer investigators on the ground have been gathering names and numbers of Indigenous community members killed, injured, raped and displaced. These numbers, no doubt gross underestimates, show that [well over 1,200](#) Batwa have been killed in the past 12 months — primarily in skirmishes with non-Indigenous neighboring communities intent on expanding their access to land and resources.

In one recent case, on July 4, 2017, a [national online news source](#) in DRC said that daylong clashes between Batwa and other ethnic groups were triggered after the Batwa killed two adversaries near the provincial capital of Kalemie. No casualty list was provided in the news article, but according to our sources, [189 Batwa people were killed](#) that day, including men,

women and children.

In the worst attack we have documented so far, on the night of January 13-14, 2017, there was a nighttime attack against the Batwa near a town called Moba. [Six hundred Batwa people](#) were slaughtered outright; at least 1,600 women and girls were brutally raped, and were being cared for using traditional medicines because there are no health centers. No pain-killers; no antibiotics; no urgently-needed surgeries; no forensic evidence; no psychological counseling. More than 40 of those women and girls had already died or were on the verge of death several days after the attack.

A desperately inadequate [RFI news report](#) on the event, translated from French, says,

“On 13 January, clashes took place ... 25 kilometers from the city of Moba. Four villages were partially or totally burned down and the population fled to Moba. In total, 24 people — four Bantus and twenty [Batwa] — lost their lives in one week.”

Is this destined to be an off-the-record genocide?

Knowledgeable sources on the ground say that neighboring tribes are intent on exterminating (yes, a dehumanizing term) the Indigenous people, and that the DRC government is determined to prevent word of this massacre from becoming known internationally. This is to be expected: President Joseph Kabila, who [refuses to hold elections](#) as required by DRC’s constitution, prefers to get rid of anything that stands in the way of [enriching elites in his kleptocracy](#). Indigenous people’s traditional land rights are an impediment to uncontrolled resource extraction.

Less expected is the lack of forthright information by the UN’s peacekeeping force in DRC. The UN’s radio station in DRC routinely downplays these incidents, and fails to distinguish between deaths of Indigenous peoples and others. A July 11, 2017, [article in IRIN](#), which reports on crises for the UN, left the dangerous misimpression that conflict and large-scale internal displacements of people in this region are instigated primarily by Indigenous Batwa militias. Without providing any objective breakdown of casualty statistics or detailed descriptions of incidents, the article presents, unchallenged, the anti-Batwa statements of individuals, primarily from the very tribal groups who are engaged in driving the Batwa off their lands.

This opacity is a major contributing factor to the ongoing crisis, providing cover for those looking to profit from the chaos. Local news sources fail to provide acceptable coverage, and international media are (rightly) afraid to send reporters in. The DRC government’s information cannot be trusted. UN investigators have been [killed](#). Local journalists have been [killed](#). Human rights advocates have been [killed](#) or [barred](#) from entering the country. International NGOs have sounded the alarm about conflicts and conflict minerals in the region, but [only one organization](#) has paid close attention to the genocide against the Indigenous Batwa. And on July 19, 2017, the UN announced plans to [shut down five](#) of its monitoring and peacekeeping bases in DRC, courtesy of the [Trump administration’s refusal](#) to meet US funding commitments.

There is, however, a way to obtain accurate and timely information on the situation: from the locals. My organization works with a network of local groups and individuals who are already on the ground and can tap into sources of information from the various ethnic

communities and factions. Their cross-verified [Field Reports](#) provide one of the only current sources of insight into the devastation faced by the Batwa in eastern DRC.

With awareness comes the possibility of transformation. On January 16, 2017, just two days after the Moba massacre, delegates from organizations across the region convened along the shores of Lake Kivu to form a multi-ethnic coalition to defend the survival and rights of the Batwa people. With strong Batwa leadership, they developed a plan of action to monitor human rights violations and violent conflict, undertake legal interventions, launch a region-wide public awareness campaign on behalf of Indigenous rights, and implement genuine conflict resolution mechanisms (unlike the [feeble government efforts](#) led by Emmanuel Shadary, an [internationally sanctioned human rights violator](#), which have failed to bring necessary issues and actors to the table).

We have a choice: we can either look away in horror, or we can take action to help stop the killing. If Congolese people of all ethnic backgrounds can join together to defend Indigenous rights, despite the horrendous civil and regional conflict of the past two decades, the least we in the international community can do is to back them up where we have influence. We need to educate ourselves and others, then support civil society efforts on the ground, demand that African Union and United Nations peacekeepers do their jobs, and block multinational resource extractive companies from providing financial incentives for genocide.

My colleagues in DRC end many of their communications with the exhortation, “Courage!” Let’s follow their lead.

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