
Burundi : Forest conservation against the people

With an area of 27,834 sq km, landlocked Burundi is a battleground between the Rwandan army and militia from the Congo, and is plagued by a protracted civil war, which has claimed the lives of thousands of Burundi civilians.

The over 5 million Burundi population is unevenly distributed geographically, with large populations displaced by economic crisis and war, forced to change their livelihoods.

In a country with a long term legacy of colonial rule by successive Dutch and Belgian colonization --added to pre-colonial divisions and problems between landlords and communal farmers-- lack of access to land has been a major cause of deforestation. The forests, once extensive, today account for some 9% of total land area.

Without addressing the real root causes, accepting the destruction as a fait accompli, the government of Burundi has recently banned a group of farmers of the province of Cibitoke from accessing the Kibira Forest natural reserve, a mountain forest covering 40,000 ha, on the grounds that farming had led to the forest's destruction so much that the area "could turn into a desert". This is the typical approach pushed by global capital with interests in biotech prospection and tourism, which seeks to establish forest reserves and national parks devoid of people, like stranded isles in the middle of a context of devastation.

"In [the northern province of] Kirundo people are dying because of food shortage; we are worried that the government will not allow us to harvest our crops in the Masango Zone yet it has not been able to feed all people starving in Kirundo," Michel Niyonsaba, 44, the farmers' representative, said.

He added that recent heavy rains had destroyed their homes and some of the crops yet the government had not provided them help. The severe food shortage that haunts northern Burundi affects more than half a million people and has even caused people to die. Declining rainfall is one of the major reasons for it.

The ban affects all farming activities in the Mirundi Zone of Bukinanyana Commune. President Niyindereye said the local administration would also stop farming in the Ruhororo Zone of Mabayi Commune, especially on the border with Rwanda and the natural forest of Nyungwe.

Protesting the cultivation ban, the farmers said the lands they had been cultivating had been given to their forefathers in 1954. They said they were expelled from the reserve in 1980, when the country's national parks were delineated.

"I was thirteen when we were ousted," Niyonsaba said. Since then, he said, they had often attempted to return to the lands in the fertile forest but always faced official resistance.

An official of the Institut National de la Conservation de l' Environnement et de la Nature (INCEN) said most of the forest destruction in the area began in late 2004 after the governor, who has since

been dismissed, distributed forestland to farmers living nearby. According to the official, the ban was imposed when many of the farmers had not yet planted their seeds.

Part of the forest had also been destroyed over the course of Burundi's decade-long civil war when security forces allowed people living around the road passing through the forests to clear the bushes where rebels were suspected to be hiding.

In a long line of responsible agents of unfair development, the ultimate victims are the weakest link in the chain and they are left to their fate.

Article based on information from: "Burundi: Farmers decry eviction from forest reserve", Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), <http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=45447>