
Kenya: International campaign for the Ogiek

The Ogiek people of Kenya constitute an ethnic minority community, which has lived basically from hunting and honey-gathering since time immemorial in the highland Tinet forest area, which are part of the vast Mau Forests in Kenya, about 250 km west of the capital Nairobi. Some of them also practise subsistence farming and livestock breeding. Even though they consider themselves as the guardians of such forests and have managed them in a sustainable way, they have been forced to defend themselves against the arbitrariness of both colonial and post-colonial governments, who have ignored them and wanted to get hold of their lands. They resisted official arm twisting and threats, and several times went to court in the defense of their rights (see WRM Bulletins 24 and 33). The last chapter of this unconcluded legal controversy has been the sentence of the Kenya Appeals Court of May 2000, which stopped the government's imminent resolution to evict the Ogiek from their homeland.

Nevertheless, the authorities insist on trying to force them out of the forest alleging that it is a protected area included in the country's Forest Act. This argument is false for two reasons. From a legal point of view, the Forest Act establishes that indigenous peoples' territorial rights have to be protected. On the ground, what the government is really doing is paving the way for powerful logging companies to enter the Tinet forests, even though it now claims it is a "protected area". The logging ban in force exempts three big logging companies --Pan African Paper Mills, Raiply Timber, and Timsales Ltd.-- who are prepared to enter the forests inhabited by the Ogiek.

A group of concerned NGOs --the US-based Digital Freedom Network, the Kenya-based Rights News and Features Service, and the Kenya Land Alliance-- launched a campaign in December 2000 to support the Ogiek's fair struggle. A web site is available (<http://www.ogiek.org>), which includes a complete explanation of the situation of the Ogiek, as well as interesting links and a model letter to be addressed to Kenyan authorities asking them to stop the destruction of the Mau Forests and the harassment of the Ogiek.

Article based on information from: "Coalition Launches Online Campaign For Kenya's Ogiek People", by Tervil Okoko, Panafrican News Agency, 31/12/2000;