
DRC: Efe Pygmies deprived of their homeland and their livelihood

In the northeast of the Democratic Republic of the Congo lies the large, dense, mountainous Ituri rainforest, which spans approximately 70,000 square kilometers. It is an area rich in natural resources. Tropical timber is harvested (legally and illegally) on a large scale. Minerals such as gold and coltan (used in mobile phones) are exploited intensively after the trees have been cut down.

The Ituri forest is home to one of the oldest populations of Africa: the Efe, also known as Mbuti Pygmies. The Efe's habitat originally took up a wider part of Africa but they are now confined to the Ituri forest since they have been pushed back by the unprecedented influx of immigrants caused by the civil war in DRC and the political crises in nearby Rwanda. Refugee camps with tens of thousands of displaced persons are not uncommon in the East of Ituri forest, along the road Beni-Komanda-Bunia.

In the early 1990s, European and Malaysian commercial logging companies moved into the region, causing devastating outbreaks of malaria, engaging in illegal poaching which rendered game scarce, and introducing money, tobacco, and marijuana, all of which left the Efe sick, hungry, and disheartened.

The Efe are hunter-gatherers and live off limited catches of small game since big game such as buffalo and elephant has been prohibited a long time ago. They hunt with flash and arrow (sometimes with poison) and hunting nets. Efe families live in dome-shaped huts made from leaves. Their culture is closely connected to their 'polyphonic' music and dance, which everybody is involved in. Besides their voices they use musical instruments such as drums, flutes, foot bells, trumpets (molimo), mouth bows, thumb pianos, etc. Their original bark clothes (mulumba) painted with beautiful abstract patterns are still created and used sometimes, but western clothing is increasingly pushing away this tradition.

After the Belgian colonization, the dense tropical rainforest was hardly penetrable by absence of good roads. Huge mud holes blocked all transport occasions. Getting stuck in the mud was guaranteed. This impenetrable situation kept the habitat of the Efe untouched.

In the last decade their traditional way of life has been much disturbed as commercial forestry is cutting deeper and deeper into the diminishing rainforest, restricting and reducing the food supply for the Efe Pygmies. Since mid 2006, rehabilitation and reconstruction of roads has enabled logging contractors to enter more easily the forest --what is equal to the destruction of the natural habitat of the Efe Pygmy People.

With their homeland and livelihood ravaged by war and big corporations in search of business, the Efe are caught in a blind alley that puts their life under siege.

On the new road Komanda – Beni, near Idohu, you can see Efe Pygmies carrying the boards by 2 people, on their heads, with a weight of approximately 70 to 80 kg fresh and wet timber. They get paid some US\$ 5 per board per team for 7 km transport. One team can do this once a day. The

payment is done direct after reception of the timber transport. Some villagers use their bicycles for transport. Sometimes a single villager carries his load on his own, his useless bow and arrows in his left hand... hunting is impossible: the noise of chainsaws made the game to disappear.

This commercial activity is closing the economic circle: heavy transport labour – low payment - buying food - no money left – next day the same: no profit at all and the forest is disappearing. As the old and wise Efe Moke once said: "You will understand why we are called People of the Forest....When the forest dies, we shall die."

Article based on: "Pygmies", Foundation Pygmy Kleinood,
http://www.pygmee.nl/pygmy_algemeen.html, "Ituri Forest", Foundation Pygmy Kleinood,
http://www.pygmee.nl/pygmy_projecten.html; "Increase of Forest Cutting speed in Eastern Ituri Forest, DR Congo", Foundation Pygmy Kleinood, info@pygmee.nl, www.pygmee.nl