

BATWA MINORITIES IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION.

2nd UN Forum on Minority issues, Geneva, 12-13 November 2009

Thank you, Madam President, for giving us the opportunity to speak in the name of our Batwa community, a minority from the Great Lakes countries.

Indeed Madam President, most of the countries of the Great Lakes are either currently facing conflicts or are post-conflict societies. The Batwa minorities have been victims and not actors of these conflicts.

The Batwa minorities have always been victims of multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion because of their ethnic belonging, extreme poverty, and illiteracy. This way, they do not participate in the public life of their countries.

The countries of the Great Lakes have put in place several processes, yet the Batwa minorities do not participate. Because of this, the Batwa are not considered as they should be, that is, as a minority people, with international rights that should be granted to them. This happens, despite the fact that some countries recognize them as first inhabitants.

We encourage and thank the government of Burundi for having put a particular emphasis on the question of the Batwa minorities and we believe that the other States, namely the DRCongo, Rwanda, Uganda, should follow in the footsteps of Burundi.

The constitutions of these countries guarantee the fair participation of all citizens in political life, but in practice this doesn't happen. Putting aside Burundi, the other countries did not make any effort to highlight the specificity of the Batwa minorities in order to facilitate their political participation.

Indeed, being in a minority situation, illiterate and poor, it is impossible for indigenous leaders to win elections in a pluralistic system. And even if they intend to create minority parties, the chances are still lower to be represented in the institutions. The use of ballot boxes and ballot papers for the thousands of illiterate Batwa remains a major obstacle during the elections, which leads to cheating and deceit when expressing their will during this process.

• Good practices

For the Batwa of the Great Lake region, strategies for political participation of the population belonging to minorities include:

- Support for schooling of children belonging to minorities;
- Elimination of illiteracy among adults;
- Strengthening of economic power of minority populations;
- Education about the rights of minority populations;
- Alliances with other communities;
- Enrolment or affiliation of minority leaders in mainstream political parties;
- Advocating for political affirmative action in favour of minority communities;

- Raising awareness of minorities to participate in the electoral processes.

In certain countries media pluralism enables everyone to access information, but unfortunately for the Batwa minorities, their poverty and illiteracy remains a hurdle.

• **Recommendations**

In consideration of this political discrimination of populations belonging to minorities, the Batwa recommend to the institutions of the United Nations and international organizations to:

- Support the Batwa minorities organizations in supporting the Batwa in the electoral process;
- Support the Batwa minority organizations and/or those organisations that help the Batwa minorities in schooling and elimination of illiteracy of the Batwa;
- Support the NGOs of the Global South in their programs to educate minorities about democratic values and political rights;
- Support the advocacy programs of minority rights organizations with the aim to recognise the specific rights of the Batwa minorities in their national legislation.

To the parliaments and governments of the countries of the Great Lakes to:

- Adopt and pass laws in favor of the Batwa minorities in order to guarantee their political participation;
- To implement free schooling policies for the Batwa minorities.

This is an invitation to the independent expert to visit our countries and discuss this question with the respective governments and the Batwa minorities.

Thank you,

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