

# Evictions from DRC's protected areas

Kai Schmidt-Soltau

## There is an increasing number of people who are being evicted from DRC's 'protected areas' both by the government and by international conservation organisations.

Conservation-induced economic and physical displacement cannot be treated as a minor issue since it affects the lives and livelihoods of as many as 17 million people in DRC – nearly 25% of the total population. The establishment of new protected areas with a total area of 20 million hectares and the enhanced protection of DRC's existing seven national parks and 57 other protected areas, which also cover some 20 million hectares, inevitably have a significant impact on the people who live in these areas or depend on the resources in these areas for their livelihoods.

Current standards define development-caused displacement as the compulsory removal processes initiated when a project's need for 'right of way' is deemed to override the 'right to stay' of the inhabiting populations. As a result, local dwellers are forcibly evacuated, and lose their lands and/or their houses are expropriated. Furthermore, in an economic and sociological sense, displacement occurs not only when taking land compels physical relocation but also when a particular development or conservation project creates restricted access to cultivatable lands, fishing grounds and forests, even if the traditional users are not physically relocated but are administratively prohibited from using the natural resources.

This view had been echoed by the World Bank which includes "involuntary restriction of access to legally designated parks and protected areas" in its most recent resettlement policy alongside involuntary displacement in respect of its effects and how they should be mitigated.<sup>1</sup>

The Virunga National Park in eastern DRC is the oldest national park in Africa, established in 1925 for research and conservation purposes. After independence in 1960, revenue creation through tourism (mainly visiting the mountain gorillas) became an additional objective. The local

people, however, benefitted little from park income and were at no stage involved in the management or regulation of the park. At the same time, significant numbers of people were displaced from the ever increasing park area; their access to traditional resources of livelihood in the park became more and more prohibited and even in the buffer zone significantly restricted. The rural people in turn became quite hostile and resisted – sometimes violently – any extension or enhancement of law enforcement. In the context of state failure in the early 1990s, many of them returned to their old settlements in the National Park.

From 2003, the estimated 180,000 people inside the park became the focus of a voluntary resettlement programme (known as 'glissement volontaire') organised by the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN)<sup>2</sup> and WWF. In 2004, more than 35,000 people were 'resettled' from an area south-east of Lake Edward. Officials admitted that this resettlement was carried out at gun-point, that no resettlement assistance was provided and that the livelihoods of the affected people have not been rehabilitated. While the resettlement programme claimed to be voluntary and based on prior and informed consultations, my discussions with the people in and near the park conducted in 2006 and 2007 documented the contrary; the people did not want to leave the park and they tried to resist, even at gun-point.

"First Mobuto's men looted the land, then Bemba's gang, then the Sudanese, then the Lord's Resistance Army and now it is African Parks." Nun from Faradje near the Garamba National Park

The idea of pushing large groups of well-organised and heavily armed agro-pastoralists out into the

surrounding rainforest environment embodied significant risks not only to peace in the region (as the lands they were promised were already occupied) and to the livelihoods of the resettlers and the host populations but also to the environment as it seems inevitable that the resettlers will clear the forests at their new site to continue with their traditional livelihood patterns.

Under the colonial administration, around 9,000 Mbuti had been allowed to remain on their forest lands inside Virunga National Park based on the bizarre notion that they were more like animals than humans. After independence, most were forced to settle in the villages outside the park. This enforced sedentarisation had disastrous effects on their livelihoods, culture and well-being. When the state failed, most of them returned to the park but when the park management was reorganised they were again forced to leave the forest and find places to settle. No resettlement assistance or land was provided to them. Currently they have no legal access to land or to any natural resources and as a result they are now landless farm labourers.

"Our new masters ... like the animals more than humans and do not mind that people suffer as long as the animals are happy". Mbuti leader

With no involvement of the affected population in the decision-making process and with no assurance of internationally agreed safeguards to avoid impoverishment, it is hardly surprising that the authorities and the international conservation organisations are often perceived as yet another "warlord, that grabs as much land as they can get"<sup>3</sup> in the shadow of the overall conflicts in the region.

Kai Schmidt-Soltau ([SchmidtSol@aol.com](mailto:SchmidtSol@aol.com)) is Director at Social Science Solutions.

1. <http://tinyurl.com/WB-OP4-12-Invol-Resettlement>

2. <http://www.iccn.cd>

3. Said to author by a traditional ruler in Beni