

# Submission by Society for Threatened Peoples

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## Gabon

Indigenous peoples Bayoka, Babongo and Baka

In Gabon, the indigenous peoples Bayoka, Babongo and Baka are forming a minority with 1.5% of Gabon's population. Lumped together under the pejorative name of "pygmies", they live in the Northeastern Equatorial Forests of Gabon. The Babongo are approximately 2,000 people.

For thousands of years they have been living as forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers in a semi-nomadic life. Today their way of life and their very survival are threatened due to massive logging in the forests that form the indispensable basis of their culture. As they do not have any rights over their territory, there is no legal way to oppose deforestation. In a common declaration of the indigenous peoples of central Africa formulated on April 13th, 2007, they stress deforestation and forest politics as the main problem of their expulsion and exclusion. Through the large-scale deforestation programmes, the „pygmies“ have in many places been driven out of their traditional home, robbed of their forest existence and largely forced to abandon their way of life and culture. Those who were able to stay in the forested Congo basin are now threatened by the exploitation of iron ore. Near the village of Belinga there is one of the world's biggest untapped iron ore deposits (supposedly 500 million tonnes). Belinga is located more than 500 km east of Libreville and 110km from the regional capital Makokou. It is still surrounded by virgin forest inhabited by pygmy people. The consortium chosen by Gabon's government to exploit the mine will be led by a Chinese state-owned company. This company did not consult the pygmies directly affected by the mine and infrastructure plans. The project does not meet any demands as transparency and human rights and plans for a vast infrastructure including roads, electricity, and running water, a port, railway, dams and two hydroelectric power stations.

As most Pygmy groups have to live without any land of their own and have been alienated from their original way of life, they are considered to the edge of society. In the majority society they are counted as "sub-humans" and are being discriminated and exploited. In matters of health and schooling they are completely ignored. Thus, their access to education, health services and new sources of income is very limited. A number of pygmies living in rural areas of Gabon's capital Libreville in close contact with Bantu suffer from human immunodeficiency, Aids and other infections. At the same time they have maintained their resistance to malaria and microfilariæ.

Pygmies are the poorest and most vulnerable groups in Gabon. They are confronted with the rigid stereotype of being backward, uncivilised "sub-human". Within this society it is impossible for them to eat with members of the majority societies or even to sit near them. Apart from this

discrimination and segregation, the pygmies are often denied basic political and civil rights. They often work in conditions akin to slavery and without basic health care, education or voting rights. Their basic human rights are negated.