

US Ambassador reveals Botswana government discrimination towards Bushmen

The following is an edited version of a cable sent to Washington DC by the US Ambassador (Joseph Huggins) in Botswana on 18 March 2005. Items in square brackets have been added by Survival for clarification and ease of reading. Items not related to Bushman issues have been edited. The subheadings are those from the original. Some key text has been emphasized by Survival.

Happiness is somewhere else

Ambassador Huggins visited ... Ghanzi and the [Bushman] relocation settlement of New Xade on March 10-11 [2005]. Rural poverty, severe dependence on government assistance, lack of income-generating opportunities, despair among youth... were identified... as dominant issues. Officials proclaimed the advantages of the relocation of the [Bushmen] out of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve... NGOs emphasized the forcible aspect of the exercise and the psychological trauma and cultural disorientation it had produced.

Problems, Problems: Any Opportunities?

Ambassador Huggins visited a training site run by the NGO [name removed]... [Name removed] was highly critical of the... resettlement policy, noting that people had been dumped in villages like New Xade, without being provided with sufficient shelter, support, or even food, and decried the idea as ludicrous that the people could transform themselves into industrious villagers, craft-sellers, while seventy miles away from a main road. They emphasized the arbitrariness, the lack of consultation, and the lack of transparency in [government] decision-making when it came to the treatment of the [Bushman] peoples...

A Recipe for Discontent: Discrimination, not Dialogue

[Name removed] considered "eviction" as a more accurate description of what took place than the [government] usage: "relocation." **[Name removed] believed that plans for mining were the reason that the [Bushman] groups were removed.**

The [government] had consistently declined to enter into dialogue on the question of the [Bushmen] and their right of access to the [reserve]... [Name removed] said that the [government] will point to large schools and shiny new buildings in the relocation villages as tokens of their benevolent intent, but, he asked, "Where are the [Bushman] professionals that the educational system is supposed to be turning out?" ... He stated [that] people's rights were being violated, and they had been torn away from familiar foods, medicinal plants, environment, and religious ties with the land. **The consequence was death in some cases, and enormous suffering in other cases.** People mourned that they could not pass on their culture to their children.

Ambassador Huggins asked how many persons had been removed from the [reserve], and how many had returned. [Name removed] estimated some 2,500 had been evicted... **[Name removed] stated that [Bushmen] are systematically being discriminated against by the [government], which moves them away from wherever there might be an income-generating opportunity.**

He cited the case of the Tsodilo Hills, renowned for its rock paintings, where [Bushmen] were moved... away, with the consequence that Hambukushu people now served as guides and craft sellers... He cited the Janatarka area... where [Bushmen] were being forced to move, as well as the Trans-Frontier Park, between Botswana and Namibia, where [Bushmen] interests were sidelined. "The land use system of the [Bushmen] is simply not recognized by the government," he said, "and **the government is unwilling to enter into any discussion on this or other matters having to do with the [Bushmen].**"

[Name removed] was clear, and contemptuous: the way to win votes in [Bushman] areas was through tobacco, food, and clothes. "They believe only in hand- outs," he said.

Ambassador Huggins and [embassy officials] visited the [Bushman] resettlement village of New Xade.

The village chief, Kgosi Lobatse Beslag, greeted [embassy officials]. The Village Development Committee, councilors, District Commissioner and the [Remote Area Development] official joined our meeting held in the chief's office. The discussion... was translated. A verbal list of concerns was recited: the first item mentioned was that New Xade has insufficient accommodation for civil servants...

Ambassador Huggins asked how people were faring after the relocation. The answer provided by the chief was that they were much better off. [Name removed], who took the lead in the discussion, echoed this opinion... people were much better off, in his opinion, living in New Xade.

Despite rephrasing of the question-whether people really wanted to be in New Xade - the standard response, no doubt also influenced by the presence of the district officials, was that everything was fine. When we asked how people make a living, there was some evasion, but eventually the answers indicated that people rely on government handouts...

... and Resisting

Only at the end of the meeting, [Name removed] ventured to answer the Ambassador's question: people are not happy... People mourn for their way of life, and regret that their children are not with them, but at school. The Wildlife Department prohibits New Xade residents who want to visit their relatives... from traveling through the reserve.

Potemkin Village? [a fake village created only to impress officials]

The New Xade clinic is an impressive building... but... looked eerily unused. We were told patients preferred to still go to the old clinic. Beds without linen attested to the truth of this.

The [government] is not likely to change its position on the [reserve]. In a subsequent meeting between Ambassador Huggins and the [government's] Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Mr. Ernest Mpofu, the Ambassador related his impressions... He made the point that... the situation of the [Bushmen] should be reconsidered. **The [Permanent Secretary] dismissed all such suggestions... He put forward again the [government] assimilationist line... Ambassador Huggins's**

suggestions that the [government] reconsider its approach to how government deals with [Bushmen] and the issue of their cultural heritage was met with thinly veiled scorn.

Comment

It is... clear that people have been dumped in economically absolutely unviable situations without forethought, and without follow-up support. **The lack of imagination displayed... is breathtaking... But the special tragedy of New Xade's dependent population is that it could have been avoided.**

HUGGINS