

Survival International has launched an international boycott of tourism to Botswana in reaction to the continued persecution of the Bushmen by government authorities.

Last week, the Botswana government responded to Survival's boycott in a letter sent to tour operators around the world. Statements made in the letter, signed by the president's spokesman Jeff Ramsay, once again demonstrate the government's unabashed ability to lie in the face of criticism. It is important to clarify the dangerous inaccuracies contained in its letter.

In 2002, the government evicted the last remaining Bushmen from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) unlawfully and unconstitutionally - as Botswana's High Court ruled in 2006. For almost five years, the Bushmen were forced to live outside the reserve in squalid government camps, in clear violation of their human rights.

In its letter, the government claims to hold an "uninterrupted" record of upholding the rule of law for "all" its citizens. Yet it forced the Bushmen from their ancestral land, packed their homes onto government trucks and sealed over their water borehole with cement. It took five years, and an unprecedented court case, for the Bushmen to redeem their right to return home. It is difficult to imagine a more fundamental interruption to the rule of law than this.

The government also imposed a hunting ban on the Bushmen which the Court once again found to be 'unlawful and unconstitutional' - but which the Government has enforced to this day.

If these were not "interruptions", what about the government's decision to deny the Bushmen access to water on their land for almost a decade?

Once again, the Bushmen were forced to take the government to court to demand their fundamental right to sink boreholes on their land, in the Kalahari Desert. Again, the Court ruled in favour of the Bushmen, describing the case as "a harrowing story of human suffering and despair". Five judges found unanimously that the Government's treatment of the Bushmen had been "inhumane and degrading", in breach once again of their constitutionally guaranteed rights.

Courts rarely deliver judgements of this severity – particularly against a government, which now claims to be one of "the most peaceful, tolerant and law abiding in the world." But the government has yet to apologize for its conduct, and has done nothing to aid the Bushmen in re-installing their water borehole.

Many Bushmen who were forcibly evicted from the reserve by force have remained in government camps, afraid or unable to return to their ancestral land. Children of those Bushmen permitted to return are forced to apply for one-month permits when they enter the reserve.

What kind of a system allows children to live with their parents only with the government's permission, and threatens them with prosecution if they fail to leave when the permission runs out?

Any Bushman caught hunting – an activity essential for the tribe's survival – faces jail and a hefty fine. Paramilitary police (SSG) have been deployed to the reserve, seemingly to intimidate and harass the Bushmen to prevent them from hunting.

The Government suggests that the best way for people to learn more about Botswana's diverse culture is to visit the country. But visitors should not suppose that they will be able to learn much about the Kalahari Bushmen. They will not be allowed to visit their communities, or bring them water or food, or provide them with any other assistance. The only 'Bushman experience' available to tourists involves Bushmen being paid to dress up in skins and enact supposedly 'traditional' activities. The reality of Bushman life wouldn't be such an attractive draw for tourists on safari.

The government has done everything in its power to wipe out the Bushmen's livelihood and culture, yet it uses images of Bushmen wearing skins and seemingly heading off on hunting trips to promote its country to tourists.

Public pressure and awareness are the only way to ensure that the government is held to account for its disgraceful and illegal treatment of the Bushmen. That is why Survival is asking tour operators to show their support for the Bushmen, by refusing to send tourists to Botswana until the country's prized 'tourist attraction' are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.