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Batwa left in the cold as govt rolls out Covid cash

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Some of the Batwa at their settlement in Kisoro Town near the district headquarters in April 2018.

PHOTO | FILE

Summary

By Israel Alex Ahumuza

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dispossessed of their land by conservation agencies, and cultivators. They now live as squatters in the south-western districts of Bundibugyo, Kabale, Kisoro, Rubanda, Kanungu and Rukungiri. Bwindi Impenetrable Forest used to be their home before they were evicted.

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The Batwa community in Kigezi Sub-region are up in arms against the government for not including them among the most vulnerable categories of people to receive Covid-19 relief funds.

Last Friday, the government embarked on disbursing the relief cash that will see the vulnerable people each receive Shs100,000 on their mobile phones.

The government also released the categories of vulnerable people, who include bus/ taxi drivers, conductors, baggage carriers, wheelbarrow pushers, barmen, boda boda riders and teachers and support staff in private schools.

However, this has not gone down well with Batwa communities who accuse government of sidelining them yet they are vulnerable.

Ms Alice Nyamihanda, one of the leaders of the Batwa community in Kisoro District, at the weekend said they had not registered for Covid-19 relief funds yet they live in poor conditions.

Besides, she added, most Batwa do not even own a mobile phone and neither do they have National Identity cards.

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“The plight of not owning a mobile phone is common among the Batwa living in Mikingo Village adjacent to Kisoro Magistrate’s Court, and government should involve Batwa leaders in such matters,” Ms Nyamihanda, who is also the finance director of Kisoro Lay Adventist Development Organisation (KLADO), said.

She added that some Batwa living in Mikingo Village, Kisoro Municipality, did not have water.

“The Batwa, after going for several weeks without water in their donated tanks due to the dry spell in Kisoro since June, decided to use sewage water for survival,” Ms Nyamihanda said.

Originally forest dwellers, the estimated 6,200 Batwa, as per the 2014 population and housing census, have been dispossessed of their land by conservation agencies, and cultivators. They now live as squatters on private and public land in the south-western districts of Bundibugyo, Kabale, Kisoro, Rubanda, Kanungu, and Rukungiri.

The executive director of KLADO, Dr David Bakunzi Barere, said their organisation is currently providing basic needs to Batwa in eight sub-counties in Kisoro, which include nutritional support, backyard gardening and house to house medical care as the public health facilities are currently stretched by Covid-19 related cases.

“Currently, we are covering more than 205 households with about 550 members. Since 2020, KLADO has supplied more than 1,000kg of posho and beans to the Batwa as food relief but this is not enough for them as Kisoro has more than 3,000 Batwa that need constant support,” he said.

Dr Bakunzi urged the government to intervene and find land and resettle the Batwa so that they can also start fending for themselves.

“Meanwhile the government should think about this group that has not benefitted

from almost any of the government projects, most especially in the rural communities,” he said.

The district chairperson, Mr Abel Bizimana, said they are yet to see the Gender ministry come to support the Batwa despite the President directing them on the matter.

“They have never come down to study and give government a report. I petitioned the President about this issue when I led a delegation to State House Entebbe a few years ago,” he said,

However, the district community development officer, Mr Sam Niyonzima, said the Batwa people in Michingo settlement were last Monday registered to benefit from the Covid-19 relief funds.

“There are other 23 Batwa communities in the rural area that government should support; some are in a despicable state,” Mr Niyonzima said.

Mr Bizimana also confirmed that the Batwa are using sewage water because the water system earlier established for them was cut off because of non-payment of bills. He appealed to the government for support.

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