

Botswana

The row about the Bushmen

GABORONE AND KAUDWANE

A row over the Bushmen is besmirching Botswana's reputation

THE village of Kaudwane may be less than 300km (186 miles) from Botswana's capital, but it is a world apart from Gaborone's smart buildings and new malls. Scrawny cows roam the sandy roadside, chewing whatever grass they can find. Thatched huts dot the scrubby, empty landscape. The school and clinic apart, brick buildings are few. Here, in Kaudwane, is the new home of people relocated from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR), a protected area of 53,000 square kilometres (20,000-plus square miles) in the middle of the country. Their fate threatens to tarnish the image of Africa's shiniest success story.

Survival International, a London-based lobby, has aroused international anxiety about the reserve's indigenous Bushmen, also known as the San, who were once hunter-gatherers. Survival says they have been moved from their ancestral land against their will to make way for diamond prospecting. Botswana's authorities say that relocation was voluntary and that diamonds had nothing to do with it: traditional hunting had given way to poaching for profit and to livestock rearing; the Bushmen, says the government, were bad for the park's wildlife conservation. So it decided to encourage relocation: a few years ago it stopped transporting children to school, delivering water and sending a mobile clinic into the reserve. All public



Moving him for his own good



services were to be provided in the resettlement villages of Kaudwane and New Xade, just outside the reserve.

Mathambo Ngakaeaja, who represents the Working Group for Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA) in Botswana, says the government treats the Bushmen as primitive, second-class citizens who must be "civilised". Questions to the government from a UN special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people have so far gone unanswered.

Since 1997, over 2,000 people—Bushman and others—have moved out of the reserve and, in return, been given livestock, a small plot of land and some money. Some try to grow food while struggling to keep their cattle and goats away from lions and other predators that venture out of the unfenced game reserve. But jobs are scarce in Kaudwane, so most people depend on government handouts; many turn for solace to alcohol. Today, fewer than 20 people officially live in the CKGR, though more have probably sneaked back in after pocketing their compensation or shuttle between park and resettlement villages.

A young man, who is unsure of his age but thinks he is about 30, does not miss his former life. "It is not that life is good here," he says, "but it's better than in the CKGR." Letshwao Nagayame, probably 60 or so, disagrees. The goats he received when he moved are gone and the government's monthly food ration isn't enough to feed his family of nine. He shows scars on his legs, saying he was severely beaten and hung upside down by park officials, who accused him of poaching.

Reports of such brutality are rife. Yet Jeff Ramsay, the government's spokesman, says that investigations have not stood up any of the accusations. In 2002, some of the CKGR's former dwellers took the government to court, arguing that their relocation was illegal. They are demanding the right to return and for government services in the park to resume. The case is pending; proceedings restarted last week.

Alice Mogwe, who heads Ditshwanelo, a local human-rights group, says the sol-

ution will be found not in court but by negotiation. She says that the confrontational campaign by Survival and others, which have accused the government of ethnic cleansing and have called for a tourism boycott, has been counter-productive and hindered the resumption of talks between government and Bushmen. Some local Bushmen organisations agree, but others say that international pressure is the only way to make the government listen.

Ms Mogwe says the Bushmen suffer more from poverty (lack of education, poor health, scant opportunities) and from the failure of a paternalistic government to consult them properly than from their removal. Some 100,000 Bushmen live in southern Africa, perhaps half of them in Botswana; numbers are hard to confirm, since ethnic lines are blurred by intermarriage. Their communities are fragmented, poor and marginalised. WIMSA, with its headquarters in Namibia, says that half of Bushmen fail to study beyond primary school. Botswana's Bushmen may on average be better off in terms of education, health and living standards than those of Angola, Namibia or even South Africa. But WIMSA says Botswana is worse than some of its neighbours at recognising and preserving their cultural identity.

The government's Mr Ramsay says foreigners are stirring up ethnic strife in a country that, unlike others on the continent, has avoided tribalism. A small, peaceful country of only 1.8m people, Botswana has been praised for using its vast diamond wealth wisely and for fostering tourism well. Its education system is one of Africa's best. While its rate of AIDS may be the highest, about half of those afflicted get free drugs. It is among Africa's least corrupt countries, its business environment among the friendliest. More's the pity that its sparkling image is at risk because of the way it is said to treat one of the continent's most vulnerable ethnic groups. ■