

Bushmen forced out of desert after living off land for thousands of years

By David Blair
in Kaudwane

THE death throes of an ancient way of life are being played out in the Kalahari sands where Botswana has resumed its policy of removing the San Bushmen from their last redoubts.

Almost two thirds of the Bushmen inhabiting the desolate Central Kalahari Game Reserve have been evicted in the last three weeks.

Witnesses accuse officials of deploying armed police and using threats of violence to clear two settlements.

The removals were the biggest since 1,550 Bushmen were driven from the central Kalahari between 1997 and 2002. After the latest operation, the government says that only 28 still live in the heart of a desert roamed by their ancestors for millennia.

A race that learned how to survive without any water-holes or wells – they take every drop they need from roots dug out of the ground – is nearing the culmination of centuries of persecution.

If Botswana's government has its way, every Bushman will be placed in 65 resettlement areas specially built on the Kalahari's fringe.

Yet victims of the latest evictions cannot understand the thinking behind them. "We are used to life in the desert, where we depend on no one and survive by ourselves in the way we have always done," said Tshatlha Ntwayamogala, who was removed from Mothomelo settlement last week.

Six police officers, armed with rifles, had made camp near the tiny village. Then four officials arrived. "They told us 'when you leave this place, you leave as volunteers'," said

UNDER TREAT



■ The Khoi San people, better known as the Bushmen, were the first inhabitants of Southern Africa.

■ Their cave paintings, tools and ostrich shell beads are found throughout the region.

■ They were hunted to the point of extermination by white settlers and black tribes alike.

■ By the late 19th century they survived only in the Kalahari desert.

■ Botswana's population is fewer than two million people.



Tshatlha Ntwayamogala says he and fellow Bushmen were told they would be killed if they did not 'volunteer' to leave the desert

Mr Ntwayamogala. "So we said 'if we are volunteers, we don't want to go'. They began threatening us. They told us, if we stay behind, they will end up killing us. One of the police said 'if you don't move, you will all be killed'."

Mr Ntwayamogala, who does not know his age, bowed to the threats and boarded a lorry. He was driven to Kaudwane resettlement area with his wife, Kaitshotlha, and every other inhabitant of Mothomelo – five people in all.

Like all Bushman set-

tlements, this one had been reduced to a tiny core of elderly residents. Mr Ntwayamogala's four sons, in common with most young Bushmen, had already left.

Days earlier, the village of Molapo had been cleared of all 25 inhabitants by the same method. Eight more Bushmen left another settlement.

Before the officials and police went on their rounds, the government said 66 Bushmen lived in the central Kalahari. Of these, 38 have now been evicted. "When

they told us to go, we wanted to run away at night and then come back," said Matsipane Moselelhanyane, 57, who was driven from Mothomelo.

"But we were afraid they would send the police to find us and shoot at us. I want to go back to that place. In the desert, we don't need money to buy something to eat. We just go to the bush and find everything we need."

Botswana's government insists that it has the Bushmen's best interests at heart. Jeff Ramsay, its spokesman,

said they were being "relocated" because their "diseased" livestock threatened the wildlife in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. "They are citizens, they have a right to education and everything else," he said. "In the resettlement areas they've got schools, clinics and the like."

Some £4.7 million has been spent on new facilities in the resettlement areas. Many Bushmen had asked to be relocated, said Mr Ramsay, denying that anyone had been threatened. Well-meaning

friends of the Bushmen have crafted a romantic mythology around their lives. Sir Laurens van der Post painted a magical portrait of them in *The Lost World of the Kalahari*.

In fact, they ceased being an untouched community of "hunter-gatherers" decades ago. Before the evictions, a few Bushmen roamed the desert in land cruisers.

Survival International, which campaigns on behalf of indigenous peoples, claims that they are being removed to make way for diamond exploration. But the Central Kalahari Game Reserve is the size of Denmark, leaving plenty of room for diamond mining regardless of the presence of the Bushmen, and Botswanan law gives all mineral rights to the state.

Some 240 Bushmen have taken the government to court, asking for the right to return to their homes. The case has run for 15 months and will resume in February.

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