
AdvocacyNet
News Bulletin 141
March 5, 2008

ADVOCATES USE TACT AND PERSUASION TO FREE ENSLAVED PYGMIES IN EASTERN CONGO

March 5, 2008, Kampala and Washington, DC: A campaign is under way in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to free pygmy slaves (known as *badja*) who have been captured in the forests or born into slavery on the estates of traditional rulers.

The three-month campaign was launched in early February by the World Peasants Indigenous Organization (WPIO), a new partner of The Advocacy Project (AP) with headquarters in Kampala. WPIO has succeeded in freeing 36 pygmy families since 2003, and helped another 120 claim their rights in the form of wages or school fees.

WPIO draws on the support of local teachers and religious leaders to persuade rather than expose the slave-owners, who are often traditional lords (*murhambi*) and kings (*abami*). Several slave-owners have responded by agreeing to free *badja*. In a letter last year to WPIO, Mwami Matabaro, the King of Burhinyi in South Kivu, Congo, expressed “deep regrets” to *badja* families that he owned and promised them freedom and land.

Another traditional ruler, Kabugu Cishugi 2nd from Lugendo district wrote: “I have been meeting with the people you (WPIO) sent to me. After very long discussions with them I am proud to say that I have understood. I accept that everybody who served me is free... I am giving (them) one cow each and lands.”

According to a recent WPIO newsletter, the tradition of enslaving pygmies goes back many years and is linked to a rigid social hierarchy which views pygmies contemptuously as “animals without tails.”

Many *badja* are caught in the forests and forced to work seven days a week for food or the equivalent of one dollar a week. Freddy Wangabo, the WPIO director, also reports that sexual abuse of *badja* women is “rampant.”

WPIO has concluded that traditional human rights advocacy – “shame and denounce” – is ineffective because the landowners are above the law and because pygmies are held in such low esteem. Aggressive advocacy can also provoke hostility. In 2003, a WPIO delegation was stoned. The same year, WPIO staff were arrested while organizing a football match to bring pygmies and Bantu together in southern Kivu. Local radio stations have refused to carry WPIO messages.

As a result, WPIO has turned to intensive but tactful lobbying of individual slave-owners, in the form of the “Ten for One” campaign. Each spring, WPIO organizes teams of 10 influential locals (teachers, religious leaders, students) to press their case with a slave-owner during a week.

While it can take years to produce results, this approach is beginning to build up a core of supporters among the *murhambi* who have not only freed their own *badja* but also joined the campaign. Kabugu Cishugi 2nd asked that WPIO “accept me be one of the noble work that you are doing for the humans under slavery and captivity.”

AP has recruited Juliet Hutchings, a graduate student at American University, to volunteer with WPIO this summer as a Peace Fellow. AP will also put WPIO in touch with advocates in Nepal who campaign against the practice known as **baligary** under which lower-caste Dalit are forced to work for food but no pay.

http://advocacy.net.org/the_bonds_of_labor/

- It costs WPIO \$20 a week to deploy a field worker for the Ten to One campaign.

AdvocacyNet is a service of The Advocacy Project (AP) that is offered to advocates working for human rights and social justice at the community level. AP is based in Washington, DC. Phone +1 202 758 3328. For more information visit our website <http://advocacy.net.org/> or email us at dcoffice@advocacy.net.org.