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PATIENT ADVOCACY FREES 96 SLAVES IN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO



Kampala, Uganda: The son of a pygmy man owned by a mining company, Burhabale Cisangani was born into slavery.*

Orphaned at age 7, he was forced to do hard labor in the Lulimba area of Congo for masters who made him work even when sick and forbade him to marry. For 28 years, this was the only life he knew.

But this spring, Mr Cisangani became a free man, thanks to the courageous efforts of the World Peasants/Indigenous Organization (WPIO), a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP) based in Uganda.

Earlier this year, a team of twenty-five WPIO activists spent three months visiting 240 families and a number of companies in five territories in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) during their “Ten for One Peace Campaign.” The campaign resulted in the release of almost 100 people who had been held as slaves.

“Victims of slavery have been routinely destroyed by sexual exploitation and other human rights abuses,” WPIO Director Freddy Wangabo wrote in a recent release of the campaign’s results. “More collective sacrifices and responsibility are needed for the interest of humankind to protect pygmies...and the other poorest communities in the country.”

In some areas of the DRC, wealthy people and traditional leaders (*mwami*) are known to capture pygmies and other poor, indigenous people and force them into slavery. The captured people are known as *badja* and are considered the property of their masters. According to the WPIO, the tradition of enslaving pygmies goes back many years and is linked to a social hierarchy that treats pygmies as “animals without tails.”

In this context, the traditional strategy in human rights advocacy – to shame the perpetrators – has proved ineffective, because pygmies are not valued by the rest of society. Instead, the Ten for One Peace Campaign uses teams of influential locals, including teachers and religious leaders, to intensively lobby individual slave-owners one at a time.

In the course of a week during the campaign, ten people speak to a slave-owner, with the final speaker being a WPIO representative who asks for the *badja*'s release. At the same time, WPIO staff and volunteers speak to the *badja*, informing them that they are supposed to be paid for their work, that they are allowed to send their children to school, that they can own cows and livestock and work for themselves.

During the most recent campaign, WPIO activists met with 447 people, including more than 300 indigenous slaves and nearly 150 local leaders, businessmen, and wealthy citizens of the region. Fifty people who were working as forced miners for companies in Lulimba were freed, along with 46 people from 12 indigenous families who had been enslaved for generations.

Under an agreement arranged by the WPIO, the mining companies agreed to let the freed workers mine for two weeks for their own benefit, and use the materials they collected to start their new lives. Each of the 12 released families received a portion of land as a step toward an independent future.

Mr Cisangani was able to mine \$21,000 in precious stones during the two weeks, and he then used the money to buy some land and build a small house. He has also opened a small shop and employs three other people. The WPIO, with information from the mining company, also helped Mr Cisangani to find his relatives, who didn't know he existed.

Juliet Hutchings, a graduate student at American University, is volunteering as an AP Peace Fellow with the WPIO in Uganda this summer. Ms Hutchings will be working on a documentary about pygmies in the DRC.

**** AP recognizes there are some who feel the term “pygmy” is derogatory. However, AP follows the lead of WPIO in using the term.***

- Read the [blog](#) of Peace Fellow Juliet Hutchings
- Learn more about the [WPIO](#)