

Bushmen under siege

The Botswana Government's relocation of hundreds of Khwe Bushmen from their homes in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve could be motivated by the hunt for diamonds. AMANDA HURLEY reports.

S EVEN hundred Khwe Bushmen who still live the life of their ancestors in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve are fighting a battle against the Botswana government who want them to move.

And the motivation behind the government's drive may not be for the protection of the land as they have professed, but to satisfy the whims of an international mining company hungry for diamonds.

According to Survival International, an independent lobby group fighting for the rights of the tribe, a multinational company has recently reserved its right to the game park after conducting exploratory excavations.

But the Botswana government last week remained cagey about their reasons for moving the people, saying the Bushmen's hunter-gathering lifestyle was hampering the protection of the reserve.

John Moreti, the Botswana High Commission's First Secretary in London, on Thursday said there were significant concerns over the size of the Khwe Bushmen's population and their use of the 52,000 square kilometre park.

"The activities by the inhabitants of the game reserve have broadened to include pastoral and agricultural activities," Moreti said.

These activities, he said, make the Bushmen's presence

in the park untenable. Yet, though Moreti cites ecological reasons for the relocation of the Bushmen, mention diamonds and his pro-conservation stance shifts.

"I don't know if minerals have been discovered in the park," Moreti said, "but if they have been, (we need to) debate whether the extent of the minerals outweighs the need to provide a wildlife park."

The Central Kalahari Game Reserve was established by Britain in 1961 in an attempt to protect Botswana's wildlife and to sustain the hunter-gatherer existence of the Kalahari people.

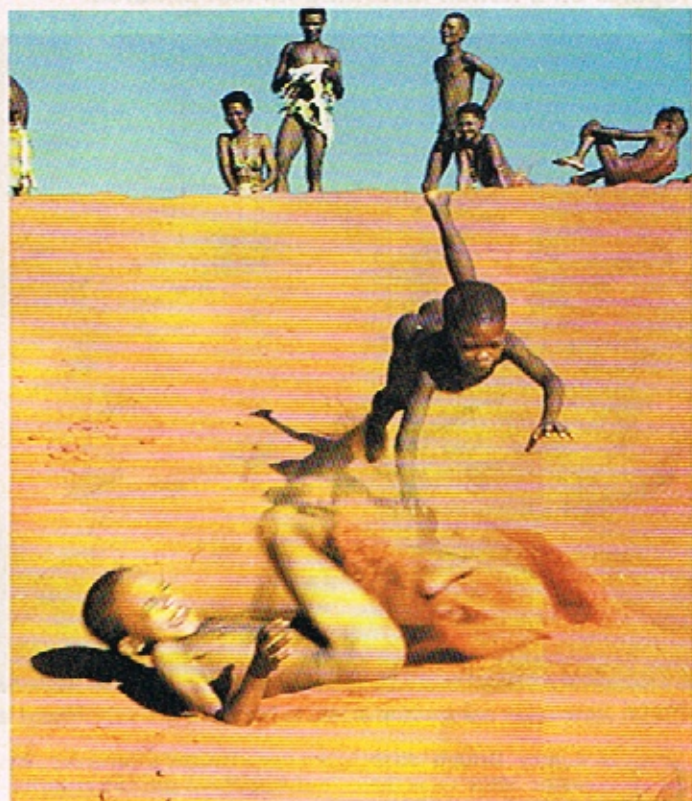
Under international law, the Khwe Bushmen hold collective tribal ownership of the land, but this ownership is not recognised by the Botswana government.

Hunting restrictions have been imposed on the Khwe Bushmen in recent years, causing tribes to rely on government handouts for food. And this quasi-welfare system is tightening.

In March, the local Ghanzi Council elected to stop the provision of all services — including food, clean water and medical supplies — to the people of the Kalahari.

Campaigners said this economic strangulation was done to force the tribe to move from their homeland.

The Central Kalahari has



UNDER THREAT: About 10,000 Kalahari Bushmen and their children have already been resettled in camps, while 700 others await their fate.

Photo: AP

been the home to the Khwe Bushmen for the past 20,000 years. In 1997, two camps were established more than an hour away from the park and more than 1000 Khwe Bushmen have been resettled there.

Survival International began a series of vigils in London last Wednesday to draw attention to the issue in the lead up to the United Nations Conference on Racism, to be held in South Africa next month.

This is not the first time the group has supported the Khwe Bushmen. In 1997, it fought against the government's resettlement campaign.

More recently, the organisation has been drawing attention to an incident last August in which 12 men and women were allegedly tortured by wildlife officials who claimed the group had exceeded their hunting limits.

There has been no official investigation into the incident.

Survival International's Fiona Watson says further

relocation would turn the Bushmen community into a quasi-welfare state, relying on the government to fulfil their most basic needs.

"In the resettlement camps there is no food to hunt so the people are 100 per cent dependent on government hand-outs," she said.

"There are also all sorts of social problems, too, such as increasing alcoholism."

And not only is their lifestyle under threat, but their culture could also be eroded as, according to Watson, the children are not taught in their Khwe language at camp schools.

"People are being thrown off their land," she said. "They are being coerced and denied basic services — and for what?"

"Why should they leave? It is their right to live there."

● CHECK out www.survival-international.org for more, or have your say by writing into Fiona Watson says further TNT at letters@tntmag.co.uk.



TAKING A STAND: Campaigner Virginia Luling will join the Wednesday night vigils outside the Botswana High Commission until August 29.

Photo: CHRIS YOUNG