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## Botswana - Basarwa

HDI RANK: **131**    POPULATION: **1,765**    GNI PER CAPITA: **5,180**

LIFE EXPECTANCY: **34**

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**Updated April 2008**

### Profile

There is no reliable data on the number of Basarwa (N/oakhwe, San, Bushman people) of the Naron, !Xo, G/wi, G//ana, Shua, Deti, /Auni, /Xam, //Xegwi, Kwe, Ju/'hoansi and //Khau-/eisi ethno-linguistic groupings living in Botswana. However previously, the government has estimated a population totalling 50,000. Basarwa people have long depended on a mixed economy. None survive solely as hunter-gatherers and only a few thousand are significantly dependent on foraging. Traditionally, both men and women engaged in gathering, while men hunted. Over a long period competition with pastoralists, loss of hunting territory to ranches and game parks, declining game, and alternative economic opportunities (however limited) have all contributed to the demise of traditional lifestyles. The isolated Bushman, untouched by history, exists only in the mind of external myth-makers. Yet Basarwa languages and culture survive under pressure.

### Historical context

The Basarwa are traditionally hunter-gatherers, and their presence, thought to date back at least 40,000 years, long predates that of the Bantu-speaking people of the region. They once inhabited territory stretching across South Africa and Namibia as well as Botswana. European explorers and subsequent colonial administrations however, did not understand the unique Basarwa way of life – and the Basarwa suffered greatly. The lands they roamed across, were seized, and they faced deep-seated prejudice from settlers who regarded them as 'primitive'.

In 1961, the Central Kalahari Game Reserve – the biggest in the world, and the size of Denmark – was set up, mainly as a bid to ensure the Basarwa's survival. But the governments of an independent Botswana have also been intolerant of the Basarwa's unique culture: they have been regarded as an embarrassment for a modern state with the one of the strongest economies in Africa.

Botswana's national wealth has been founded on its diamond reserves – and in the 1980s, exploratory drills were sunk in the Game Reserve and diamonds were found. Although the government claimed there was no connection between diamonds and subsequent events – in 1997, 2002, and 2005, there were a series of forced evictions.

Meanwhile, the government destroyed water supplies and withdrew social services, making it harder for the Basarwa to return. The government claimed it was too expensive to provide essential services – such as health and education – in the reserve. It also said most Basarwa had been moved voluntarily.

The Basarwa have been moved into squalid resettlement camps where there is no opportunity to pursue their traditional way of life. They face high rates of unemployment, alcoholism and have been exposed to HIV infection. Botswana has one of the highest rates of HIV in the world. Hunting in the Game Reserve was banned, and the Basarwa caught breaking the law, arrested.

## Current issues

Most Basarwa work on farms, as small cattle farmers, or as labourers and casual workers on cattle posts or in towns, often supplementing their income by selling handicrafts, meat or foraged products such as thatching grass or firewood. A few hundred work in the tourist industry.

Employment relationships are often highly exploitative, with wages systematically low. Unemployment and dependency are widespread. In many places apathy, demoralization and alcoholism are rife. Basarwa face considerable social discrimination. Many Basarwa live in Remote Area Dweller settlements, where tenure rights are uncertain. Such settlements are generally dominated by other groups even where Basarwa are the majority; despite their changing occupational status, Basarwa are often still regarded as foragers who do not need rights to land or grazing.

In 2002, the Basarwa, supported by local and international NGOs, filed a court case alleging that their evictions from the CKGR were illegal. The evidence was not heard until 2004, and in December 2006, in a landmark decision, the High Court of Botswana ruled 2-1 in favour of the plaintiffs. Judge Mpaphi Phumaphi said the treatment of the remaining Basarwa in the Game Reserve amounted to 'death by starvation' as they were prohibited from hunting, or receiving food rations. Judge Unity Dow ruled the government had "failed to take account of the knowledge and culture" of the Basarwa, when it expelled them. However, the verdict also said the government was not obliged to provide basic services, to anyone wishing to return to the reserve, nor had it acted illegally by terminating essential services in the Game Reserve.

Although hopes were high in the immediate aftermath of the verdict, it seems that the Botswana government is intent on only conceding the narrowest possible interpretation of the ruling.

When a group of Basarwa/San attempted to return in January 2007, they were blocked from entering the CKGR with family members not named as plaintiffs. While the Basarwa/San insist that the ruling must apply to all of their community, the government of President Festus Mogae appeared to take the narrowest possible interpretation. Coinciding with the end of Mogae's tenure in March 2008, the UN Human Rights Committee criticized Botswana for making the right of Basarwa/San to return to the CKGR conditional on prior provision of identity documents and a hunting licence, and for refusing to provide access to groundwater for returnees.

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