

Forest plundering threatens Aka pygmies of Central Africa

AFP | Apr 6, 2023, 05:15 PM IST



MBATA: "We are just living with the last remaining trees," Eugene Omokomi said sadly, scanning a broad sweep of his tropical forest home that has been devastated by industrial logging and illegal woodcutters. Since he was a child, the 55-year-old Aka pygmy has lived in the Mbata forest, in a community around 110 kilometres (65 miles) from Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR).

Some 40 percent of the population of Mbata are Akas -- traditionally nomadic hunter-gatherers who have long been ostracised in the impoverished central Africa state.

For centuries the forest provided all their needs, from food to clothes and medicine.

In recent decades, many pygmies migrated to towns and villages, coming up against discrimination and friction with other ethnic groups, and often surviving in huts made from branches at the edge of the settlement.

Around 100,000 Aka people, scattered across southern CAR and the north of the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo, still depend on the forest, according to an estimate in 2018 by the Encyclopaedia of Aka Pygmies.

But deforestation threatens their habitat, and with it their ancestral lifestyle.

According to Global Forest Watch, the CAR alone lost 193,000 hectares (475,000 acres) of primary rainforest between 2001 and 2021 -- more than a fifth of total forest cover.

The impact is all too evident at Mbata, where the first logging companies arrived in the early 1980's.

The Akas had already been uprooted from the heart of the forest in the Lobaye region and installed in areas closer to roads, under a policy imposed in the 1940s by the CAR's colonial power, France.

Commercial logging, together with illicit wood cutting by individuals, has gnawed away at what they have left.

In danger

"The trees which produce fruits, enable wild vegetables to grow or let us pick caterpillars (a key part of the Aka diet), have been cut down," said Omokomi. "We are in danger."

At the Aka settlement, sitting under the shade of her palm-leaf home, 70-year-old Pauline Ndakpema sadly recalled the days when her family could live off the forest.

"I could easily find wild vegetables like the gnetum," a red-berried vine that grows around trees, "or wild basil we use to make maboke," a local dish, she said.

"Today they are rarer and rarer," she said.

Wild yam, tarot and other roots are today "very difficult" to find, and as for wild animals, "before, they roamed all around us, but we don't see them any more," she said.

She blamed deforestation on poor soil and climate change.

"Before I could work my field just behind the house," she says.

Now, she said, she may spend up to five days alone without food while the rest of the family go off hunting in the now-distant

denser parts of the forest.

Close to the Aka camp, planks of wood are piled up among the tall weeds on the edge of a clearing scattered with tree roots that have been freshly sawn by illegal woodcutters.

"It's the only way we can survive," said one of them, working with six others. "We only work at night."

Paul Mbambali, a farmer, said "the illegals chop down trees which provide medicines -- we don't have money to go to the hospital for treatment."

Asking for anonymity, an employee of the Water and Forestry ministry said the fight against illegal cutting was undermined by "under-staffing and lack of vehicles" to mount patrols.

Exile

Forest-dwelling pygmies live just from hunting, fishing and foraging, said Lopez Dack, head of an NGO called the Alliance for the Development of the Environment and Aka Pygmy Culture.

Depletion of their habitat in the CAR has forced some to cross into the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo "to find a forest dense enough" to live in, he said.

Ensnared in a plant nursery, Irack Mayewokoa, head of a village committee to protect natural resources, watered hundreds of shoots of different tree species.

Some are endangered, such as the sapelli, a favourite tree for caterpillars -- the species "needs a century to grow," he said.

"We have more than 3,000 trees ready to plant," he said. All that was lacking was the funds to plant them.