

AN historic conference which examined the development of Basarwa took place in Windhoek, Namibia in June this year.

About 100 Basarwa from Botswana and Namibia attended the conference. The Botswana delegation included six Basarwa, various government officials and politicians.

The meeting, hosted by the Namibian government, and sponsored by Norway and Sweden gave Basarwa groups a platform to air some of their grievances, needs and aspirations.

For the first time, the Basarwa of southern Africa, believed to have been marginalised from time immemorial and further isolated by their nomadic way of life, spoke their minds to their respective governments, and international observers.

During the three-day conference, deliberations were conducted in several Sarwa languages and translated from one to the other and into Setswana, Afrikaans and English.

The discussions centred around land rights, hunting, access to water, education and health facilities.

What did not emerge from the conference was a demand from the various Basarwa groups to secede from Botswana and Namibia and form their own nation. This demand had been made before by others.

Instead all Basarwa explicitly stressed that they no longer wish to be isolated from other ethnic groups, but want to settle down, grow crops, rear cattle, send their children to school, and take their rightful places within society.

About 30,000 Basarwa live in Namibia, according to the latest studies. In Botswana, about 26,000 Basarwa live in settlements

— some of which are planned and permanent.

At some settlements the Basarwa are in conflict with cattle owners over disputed land rights. Other Basarwa await re-location to settlements with more facilities and permanent water.

The Basarwa of Botswana are found in six districts — Central, Northwest, Kgalegadi, Ghanzi, Kweneng and South East.

The latest data on Basarwa in Botswana, upgraded this June, indicate that there are 15 settlements in Central District, numbering between 360 to 1,500 inhabitants each, 11 settlements each in the Northwest and Ghanzi, 16 in the Kgalegadi, three in Kweneng and six in the South East district.

Although many similar requests were made by the Basarwa of Namibia and Botswana, it became apparent that those living in Botswana have access to more facilities.

This may be because the Botswana

government has had a policy for Remote Area Dwellers (RADs) — which includes the Basarwa — for the past 20 years, while newly independent Namibia has yet to develop one.

In Botswana, most of the basic infrastructure is in place in each of the recognized settlements where a headman has been appointed, according to official reports.

For example, Kedia settlement, which lies 24 kilometres from Mopipi in the Central District, has a population of 616, including three health staff, ten teachers and a headman.

Economic activity in Kedia centres around hunting and gathering, beer brewing, basketry, livestock rearing, sewing, knitting and metal work. Water is pumped from Mopipi.

Other economic activities prompted by the government in such settlements include carpentry, knitting, leather works,

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woodcarving, bonecarving, mat-making, gardening, beekeeping, brickmoulding, tanning, blacksmithing and collecting thatching grass.

RADs, as an official term, was intended as a geographic description of the distances goods and facilities must travel from Gaborone, and not as a derogatory label as construed through the Setswana version of "teng-nyana-teng".

While the Botswana government policy is not to distinguish or isolate any particular ethnic group from another, an informal segregation has occurred because of discriminatory attitudes against Basarwa.

Take the land issue. In Botswana, land owned by the people through a communal system is administered by land boards on the recommendations of the chief or kgosi.

In practice, few if any Basarwa have gained ownership to land, although they have the right to apply for communal land, like other Batswana. The Namibians meanwhile, don't have any lands delegated as communal, although they have provisionally demarcated an area called 'Basarwaland'.

Botswana's Permanent Secretary of Local Government, Lands and Housing, Ms Pelonomi Venson, told the conference that the country's RAD policy contained a few shortfalls, and is currently under review.

"Although infrastructure provision seems to be under control, we have recognised that the equal opportunity enshrined in our laws may have not had the full utilisation exploitation by the Sarwa people for a variety of reasons," she said.

Continuing, she noted that the government of Botswana recognises there "seems to be hampered access to land and that this

may be a result of the nomadic nature of the Sarwa people and also resulting from the realisation of this by land authorities, who do not impress upon them the need to settle and exercise rights to land."

This encouragement is crucial, Ms Venson stated, as there may be no land left for the Basarwa by the time they decide to settle down and exercise their rights.

Conference participants recognized that most Basarwa currently live in poverty and linked to this, is their culture, which while it should be preserved, should not be seen in isolation to their social and political situation.

What emerged from the Windhoek conference is the clear desire by Basarwa to be recognised as a people with rights to land, water, education, health and dignity. As a group, they are tired of being downtrodden.

They also do not wish to be isolated from the rest of society. They want equal access and opportunity. They see education as the means of attaining these goals.

The Basarwa representatives also said that they no longer wish continue a nomadic lifestyle. Perhaps drought, population increase and pressure over land ownership have helped in re-shaping their desire for permanent settlements.

The conference also recognized the need for mainstream society to change their attitudes towards Basarwa and accept them equally, as a people entitled to justice and fairness.

Participants noted that the derogatory light in which Basarwa are normally viewed does not help nation-building. Attitudes need to be changed and a full social acceptance that Basarwa are not lesser human beings than others, is imperative.

Ms Venson said that while the Botswana government tries to ensure equal development across the country, certain cultural relationships between Basarwa and other ethnic groups have evolved.

It is not uncommon for Basarwa to be kept as herders who are meagerly paid, if at all. In many cases wages take the form of hand-me-downs, tobacco, alcohol and food.

Hence one of the resolutions passed at the Windhoek conference was that clear labour laws were needed to halt the exploitation of Basarwa herders and domestic workers.

Indeed another resolution to turn the Windhoek conference into an annual event is one sure way of monitoring the development of Basarwa.

Such a forum is intended as a watchdog of government policies which affect Basarwa, and provides a means of tracing segregation and discrimination where these slip up. More importantly, such a forum will hear from the very people for whom development is meant.

Striking a key theme of the conference, the Namibian Deputy Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Mr Daniel Tjongarero attacked those who he said wanted to promote separatism, ethnicity and even racism towards Basarwa.

"Gone are the days when Basarwa were regarded as mere objects for aesthetic appreciation and admiration or socio-anthropological research," he continued. "Today they are part of a vibrant society, and they too take their place among all rightful people in this continent, ready to co-shape their country's destiny with all other citizens."

Below: A sequence showing a Sesarwa traditional way of making fire.

