

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Development priorities for Russian indigenous peoples

At the 6th Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East of the Russian Federation, held in Moscow on 23–24 April 2009, problems, hotspots and priorities were clearly defined.

The president of the association, Sergej N. Harjuči, who was subsequently reelected for his fourth term, presented a summary of the association's work during the past four years. Many representatives of regional chapters of the association took the floor, and briefly reported on their main concerns: among them, legislation, the environment, interrelations with oil and gas companies, and social development. A detailed resolution from the congress is now being prepared.

Numerous important issues were raised at the congress. The topics briefly described below are those that impressed me as being the most prominent.

- Dilution of the federal legislation concerning indigenous peoples' rights to land and water. In the 1990s and early 2000s several laws were adopted that were supposed to safeguard traditional indigenous land use. A number of by-laws and amendments, the outcome of lobbying from the resource extraction industry, have subsequently rendered these laws ineffective. In addition, a contradiction has developed in many regions between federal and regional law, which has not yet been adjusted. As a result of this, indigenous peoples have lost their legal title to land and natural resources, and can—in principle—be deprived of their living space at any time, wherever industrial companies want to take over. Monetary compensations will in reality not make up for the loss.
- High death rates and high infant mortality. Although birth rates remain higher than death rates, the average life expectancy for indigenous peoples is about 18 years less than the Russian average. The health situation is severe in many regions, where medical care and supplies are insufficient or lacking for the rural population.
- The economic basis for the life of indigenous peoples is diminishing. Rather than bringing prosperity to the northern regions of Russia, industrial development occurs at the expense of traditional livelihoods. In some



The destruction of grazing land and migration routes by heavy vehicles in connection with the hydrocarbon industry, pictured here in the Varandey area of the Nenets Autonomous District, is a major concern for reindeer herders. Russia is the only Arctic country that does not prohibit driving with heavy vehicles on unfrozen tundra ground. (Photo: Association of Nenets People Yasavey, 2002.)

areas indigenous peoples have no—or far too low—fishing/hunting quotas, but the licenses are put out for tender and are given to companies. Local people are accused of poaching, and access to their traditional foods is denied to them.

- The persistence of indigenous languages, pillars of their cultures, is increasingly precarious.
- Funds for the economic and social development of the indigenous peoples are generally decreasing.
- The real local situation seems very much to depend on who has important positions in the administration, and which companies are operating. This reflects the lack of a consistent interpretation and implementation of the legislation.

The complete lack of references to climate change at the congress may surprise the Western observer. The reason for the absence of this topic, which is currently eclipsing many other problems in the West, may be composite. First, the political, environmental, and social problems of other kinds faced by indigenous peoples in Russia are so large and pressing that time to think about possible future effects of climate change is a luxury they cannot afford. Second, nothing serious seems to have happened so far in the Russian North that could not be part of natural cyclic climate variations that have been experienced before.

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Third, long-term policies to meet the expected future effects of climate change are not under public debate in Russia. As a result of all this, climate change is not an issue (see also Forbes & Stammer 2009).

Reference

Forbes B.C. & Stammer F. 2009. Arctic climate change discourse: the contrasting politics of research agendas in the West and Russia. *Polar Research* 28, 28–42.