



# Pan-Tribal Confederacy of Indigenous Tribal Nations

The Only Multi-Racial Worldwide Indigenous Confederacy In Existence

---

## Japan Officially Recognizes Ainu

*By Catherine Makino*

*June 13, 2008, Inter Press Service News Agency*

<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=42738>

TOKYO, Jun 11 (IPS) - In a historic breakthrough Japan's Diet has unanimously passed a resolution pressing the government to recognize the Ainu as indigenous people.

"We are thrilled," said a tearful Tadashi Sato, director of the Ainu Cultural Center in Hokkaido. "This is the first time the government has recognized us as indigenous people. We appreciate it."

The resolution calls on Japan to officially recognize them as a people with a unique culture and language and promote policies to address their problems.

There are about 200,000 Ainu living throughout Japan though most are on the northernmost island of Hokkaido. They were once thought of as the remnants of a Caucasoid group but this is yet to be proved.

"The next step is to make sure the government follows up on its promises," Sato told IPS. Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura said the government would set up a panel of experts to study ways to bring back their dignity.

This is a significant step toward recognizing that Japan is not a "pure single- race" society and that any such ideology can only be based on myth.

"It puts an end to years of false reporting to the United Nations by the Japanese government to the effect that Japan has no minorities and therefore is not practicing discrimination," says Andrew Horvat, a professor at Tokyo Keizai University who has written on the topic. "In fact, the treatment of the Ainu over the past 150 years by the Japanese majority is no different from the sad history of aboriginal peoples in the U.S., Canada or Australia."

This move in the Diet means that the representatives of the majority of Japanese people agree that their country is multi-ethnic and that its laws and policies should reflect that fact.

"This is a historic move and has great significance for people from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East who have arrived in Japan in increasing numbers to work in various capacities -- from IT entrepreneurs to construction workers," Horvat said.

The resolution comes ahead of Japan's hosting of the G8 Summit in Hokkaido in July.

"Coming right before the G8 Summit is no coincidence," says Gregory Clark, head of the Research Japan Office and Honorary President of Tama University. "The media were bound to make a fuss about their lack of status."

Recognition means the government can diffuse any embarrassing protests. It is also a gesture that burnishes Japan's image as leaders from major industrial nations prepare to gather in Hokkaido.

Last month, thousands of Ainu gathered in Tokyo on a sunny afternoon and held a demonstration calling for recognition as indigenous people. Then the Renrakukai -- an Ainu group that was founded in 1994 -- presented officials from four government ministries a petition in a meeting arranged by lawmakers who supported their cause. There were 6,419 signatures and 180 groups demanding their rights from the government.

The U.N. adopted a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People last September recognizing a broad variety of rights, including rights to ancestral land for indigenous peoples.

"There could also be a Tibet connection since someone was bound to notice that Japan's Ainu policy of total assimilation makes even the Chinese look good," Clark said.

Many Ainu live in discrimination and poverty. According to a 2006 survey by the Hokkaido government, the ratio of Ainu living on welfare was more than three times that of the national average. The proportion of Ainu receiving higher education was one-third the national average.

Machimura did not state whether the government would recognize land compensation claims. In fact, some critics say his statement did not represent a change in official government position.

In 1986, then Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone made the comment that "Japan is an ethnically homogeneous nation." It triggered protest by the Ainu and their supporters and sparked the native protection law. It was also around this time that the public started to become aware of Ainu issues.

Then in 1997, the Ainu culture promotion law took effect, replacing the natives' protection law, aimed at preserving ethnic culture. It was an effort to pass down Ainu songs and dances to their younger generation.

While the majority of Ainu in Hokkaido have cheered the adoption of the resolution, some remain skeptical. "I was happy when the [1997] law was passed, I have yet to see our situation improve and I'm afraid to expect too much now," says Hokkaido resident Urawa Toyama.

The Ainu still plan to make the world aware of their situation and culture in Hokkaido at the Jul. 1-4 Indigenous Peoples Summit, ahead of the G8 Summit.