



Pan-Tribal Confederacy of Indigenous Tribal Nations

The Only Multi-Racial Worldwide Indigenous Confederacy In Existence

Worldwide, Native Peoples experience daily what it means to be indigenous in the 21st century - for how many more centuries?

March 16, 2010

DEAR SISTERS AND BROTHERS SPREAD ALL OVER GAIA:

Two Countries, One People

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When Cultural Survival's team met with Dukha reindeer-herders in Mongolia this summer, they told us about an incident that happened in late winter two years ago. That time of year is hardest for the Dukha, as game is scarce and the cold is lethal. They often go days without eating, and hunger drives them to follow game signs wherever they lead. In this case, two Dukha hunters found animal tracks in the snow and followed them north. The animal crossed the unmarked international border into Russia, and the Dukha followed. Some miles later, Russian border guards spotted and arrested the men. They took them to Munday, a town 16 hours away by car where they were forced to wait for a month for a hearing. The hunters' families had to sell part of their herd to feed themselves and pay the hunter's expenses while they waited. Eventually the men were fined and released, but the damage was done.

This story is emblematic of the situation of indigenous peoples living near international borders everywhere. Most indigenous peoples have had to deal with negligent or abusive governments, but indigenous peoples living along international borders have to deal with two or more such governments. And the problems are substantial. The simple act of going to visit a relative on the other side is a hassle, and often an impossibility. A larger problem is maintaining a single trans-boundary indigenous government and coordinating it with multiple national governments. The most striking example of this situation is the Mohawk that Kristina Allen writes about in this issue. The jurisdiction of their traditional tribal council of chiefs overlaps with two different councils imposed by the United States and Canada, one state government and two provincial governments, and two national governments.

The governments of the United States and Canada, at least, are friendly and politically similar, but consider the problems faced by the Karen, who straddle relatively benign Thailand and the abomination that is modern Burma. As Greg Scarborough describes in his article on page 29, the Burmese government has persecuted and attacked Karen people mercilessly and driven them from their homes with little more than the clothes on their backs. The Karen end up in refugee camps in Thailand, where some of them have lived for decades, cut off from their homeland and the physical and social context that frames their cultural identity. They have to find their own ways to sustain their religious and cultural traditions and face corrosive competition from missionaries who try to convert them.

The aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks has produced new complications for already-challenged indigenous peoples in the United States who live along international borders. For the Tohono O'odham of Arizona and Mexico, the government's antiterrorism efforts have produced new terror. Thanks to the jack-booted paranoia of Homeland Security, O'odham people who want to sleep outside can expect to be spotlighted all night, and even those who sleep in their houses have been subjected to armed troops bursting into their bedrooms, ostensibly searching for terrorists. Equally troublesome are the drug traffickers, who moved their operations to the sparsely populated O'odham reservation after security was tightened at the official entry points. The money they offer to O'odham people has corrupted many tribe members and involved them in the drug trade. At the same time, it has increased the pressure on the O'odham from border patrol agents.

Then there are the problems of nomadic peoples. The Tuareg in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, have to follow the shifting grass line of the Sahel, and depending on the changeable rains, their grazing lands might vary north and south by hundreds of miles from one year to the next. That means they may be in any one of three or four different countries. Are they citizens of all those countries or none?

From an indigenous perspective, that question is backwards. Countries overlay indigenous territories. This is true in a temporal sense—indigenous peoples were there first—and in a physical sense: National borders are political constructs, whereas the boundaries of indigenous territories tend to be based on things like forests or animal ranges. Hunters like the Dukha view the land in terms of biomes, climate, and topography. Their territory is determined by the needs of their reindeer and the habitat of the game animals they hunt. From their point of view, they don't live in Mongolia or Russia; they live in the taiga.

Then there are the Buryats described on page 40. Their traditional territory is defined largely by the central figure in their creation myth, Geser. The places where they live are the places where Geser defeated a monster or cast down an evil spirit. Their landmarks are sacred sites identified by shamans traveling between worlds. The Buryats' landscape is as much spiritual as it is physical, in the same way that the Dukhas' is ecological rather than political.

In the end, that is the real issue of indigenous people and international borders: vastly different frames of reference. Governments need to recognize and honor those different perspectives, just as they need to honor the primacy of indigenous people's claims to their land. The most important action is for governments to approve the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and take affirmative steps to implement Article 36, which provides that, "Indigenous peoples, in particular those divided by international borders, have the right to maintain and develop contacts, relations, and cooperation, including activities for spiritual, cultural, political, economic, and social purposes, with their own members as well as other peoples across borders."

Taken from: www.culturalsurvival.org

One World – Many Cultures – One Love
Greetings from arDaga