



## INDIGENOUS PEOPLE INDIGENOUS VOICES

### FACT SHEET

## INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE ARCTIC REGION

Issues related to indigenous peoples in the Arctic region will be the focus of a half-day discussion on 21 May 2009 as part of the Eighth Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, to be held at UN Headquarters in New York from 18 to 29 May. The discussion is expected to highlight some of the threats and opportunities facing the approximately 400,000 Arctic indigenous peoples today.

### CLIMATE CHANGE

Global warming predictions indicate a potential average increase in temperatures over the next century of between 1.4 and 5.8°C worldwide, with the Arctic region already warming twice as fast as the global average. The consequences for Arctic indigenous peoples are many:

- Effects can already be seen in the shrinking of the Arctic ice cap, rising sea levels, changes in plant and animal ranges and behaviours, and thawing of the permafrost, the latter of which is already causing serious damage to buildings, pipelines, roads and other infrastructure in Alaska and Siberia.
- Warming also impacts reindeer herders and hunters who travel on frozen rivers and through snow. The caribou and reindeer they hunt have less access to food due to increased melting and freezing of the snow.
- The opening up of the Arctic Ocean and the North West Passage due to the melting of sea ice could also bring significant opportunities for indigenous peoples, with industries such as mining potentially becoming as important as traditional industries such as fishing. Such developments would, however, necessitate the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights to land and sea and their right to free, prior and informed consent in matters affecting their lives.

### SELF-DETERMINATION

While some indigenous peoples of the Arctic enjoy a good degree of political representation, this does not always guarantee that their rights are recognized and respected in practice. Arctic indigenous peoples have expressed their political views in several ways:

- The **Arctic Council** was created in 1991 to address the "common threats to the Arctic environment and the impact of pollution on the fragile Arctic ecosystems". Members of the Council are Canada, Denmark (Greenland, Faeroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States. Indigenous peoples have permanent representation on the Council.
- **Greenland** was granted home rule within the Danish Kingdom in 1979 and, in 2008, in a referendum on greater independence for Greenland, voters elected to expand home rule and, among



other things, replace Danish with Greenlandic as the official language.

- The **Sámi** people of Northern Europe, estimated to total around 100,000, are politically represented by three Sámi parliaments in **Sweden, Norway** and **Finland**. In 2000, these three Sámi Parliaments established a council of representatives between them, called the Sámi Parliamentary Council.
- In **Norway**, the status of the Sámi as a people is officially recognized by a constitutional amendment. In contrast, Finland considers its approximately 7,000 Sámi a linguistic minority rather than an indigenous people.
- Although officially **Russia** only recognizes some 50,000 indigenous persons, it is estimated that a total of 44 indigenous peoples – or around 250,000 individuals – currently live in Russia, ranging from large groups such as the Evenk and Nenets to small groups such as the Enets and Oroch.
- Approximately half of the 42,000 people living in **Canada's** Northwest Territories (NWT) are indigenous and, over the last 25 years, land claims and self-government negotiations have recognized indigenous rights. In 1999, the territory of Nunavut was carved out of the NWT, following a land claim by the Inuit.

## PRESERVATION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

The state of the Arctic region's some 40 indigenous languages is varied:

- Many suffer from a loss of speakers, including many of the Saami dialects/languages, Yukagir, Aleut, and several Athabaskan languages in Alaska and Canada. Other languages are faring better, including Northern Saami, Tundra Nenets, Sakha, Chukchi, St. Lawrence Island Yupik, central and eastern Canadian and Greenlandic Inuktitut, Chipewyan, Dogrib, and Slavey.
- Some governments have made efforts to preserve indigenous languages. Denmark declared Greenlandic an official language in 1979 and, in 2004, it was estimated that the Inuit language as spoken in Greenland had around 74,500 speakers.
- In 2006, only around half of all Inuit in Canada reported that Inuktitut was their home language. However, some recent developments in the preservation of indigenous languages in Canada include the passing of two historic pieces of legislation by the Nunavut Government, establishing a bilingual education system and ensuring that the Inuktitut language is used daily in services and communications with the public.

## SOURCES

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