The Human Security of Endangered Peoples

Indigenous Groups Living in Isolation and First Contact

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Introduction

Across the millennia during which human beings gradually migrated to the furthest reaches of the globe, countless civilizations and cultures, languages and religions emerged to describe and enrich the human experience. In a very real sense, cultural diversity represents the common heritage of humanity. Although the globalization of media, commerce and technology in recent decades has been accompanied by a certain convergence among the world's urban elites, the majority of humanity conserves and transmits diverse identities. None do so more than indigenous peoples.

The indigenous peoples of today are among the most fragile of human societies. They represent the surviving remnants of millions of individuals and thousands of tribal groups who inhabited vast territories prior to the era of Western exploration. Since that era began, indigenous peoples have suffered forced relocations, massacres, contagious diseases, discrimination, assimilation, kidnappings, and exclusion. Colonial clearances forced many indigenous peoples to retreat into remote and often hostile lands.

Some indigenous groups remain in isolation as a response to the atrocities suffered during contact by their ancestors, remote and near, stories of which have been passed down through oral histories. Those in isolation as well as those who have been able to remain in their ancestral territories generally lack legal title to their lands and resources, and are subject to the whims of the states created in the wake of invasion and occupation. Few states recognize indigenous prior ownership of ancestral lands, and even fewer acknowledge their prior sovereignty and independence.

There is little reason to wonder why some groups of indigenous reject any outside contact and instead continue to live in voluntary isolation from the society created around and encroaching on them. Isolation is the indigenous means of ensuring their physical and cultural survival. In Latin America, in particular, the choice of isolation reflects the profound mistrust that has been transmitted across generations, stemming from the Conquest, the slavery and death suffered during the rubber boom that overtook them between 1880 and

1 This article represents the personal views of the author and should not be attributed to the Commission except for directly cited or quoted extracts from Commission reports.
1920, recent slave-like practices on large plantations, and current violent encounters with logging, mining and oil companies. In sum, it is not always because of a lack of contact that indigenous peoples are in isolation, but rather because they have had previous contact of such dire consequences that they have chosen to live apart to safeguard their lives and well-being.

Although such indigenous peoples have been able to retain their isolation throughout history, it is uncertain whether they will be able to do so in the future. The insatiable desire for cheap energy to fuel consumer demands for ever more products is bringing the modern world into the remaining areas of indigenous habitation, threatening the cultural, spiritual and physical survival of such communities. Among them, the last groups of hunter-gatherers to inhabit the planet in harmony with nature face extinction. Concerned non-governmental organizations refer to the situation as one of ‘silent genocide’.

This contribution examines the situation of indigenous peoples in isolation, as well as the threats and challenges that they face. The focus is on Latin America, where nearly all such groups live, in Amazonia and in the Paraguayan and Bolivian Gran Chaco. The discussion notes the varied responses of states, from recognition of the issue in domestic law to controversy and disagreements over whether such groups exist. Despite the variety of legal responses, the challenges and dangers to indigenous peoples in isolation tend to be the same: the gradual but persistent invasion of their territories; legal and illegal exploitation of the natural resources essential to their survival; and illnesses and epidemics that come with the incursions. Even those purporting to have...

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4 In 2007, press reports described the Mashco Piro, isolated indigenous peoples in the Peruvian Amazon threatened by mining and oil exploitation. Thereafter, President Alan García wrote an article questioning the existence of the group: ‘Against oil, they [the environmentalists] have created the figure of the “uncontacted” native jungle dweller; that is, unknown but presumed, and thus millions of hectares cannot be explored, and Peru’s petroleum must remain underground while the world is paying US $90 per barrel. They prefer that Peru continue importing its oil and getting poorer’. Alan García Pérez, ‘El síndrome del perro del hortelano’ El Comercio (Lima, 28 October 2007); David Hill, ‘Who are the Mashco-Piro Tribe and Can They Still Hope to Stay “Uncontacted”? (The Ecologist, 1 February 2012) <http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_analysis/1225575/who_are_the_mashco-piro_tribe_and_can_they_still_hope_to_stay_uncontacted.html> accessed 14 April 2014.