

Economic and Social Council
Commission on Human Rights
Sub-Commission on the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights
24th Session of the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples
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Agenda item 4 : Review of developments
a) General Debate;

Urmat Kniazev

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649792 Russia
The Altai Republic
The Kosh-Agach District
Kurai
Ul. E. Beleekova, 29

Brothers and sisters!

My name is Urmat Kniazev. I represent the people of Telengit, who, since the dawn of time, have lived in Southern Siberia, in what is now the Altai Republic of the Russian Federation.

There are around 17,000 of us. The Telengits live in the center of Asia, at the juncture of four states: China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Russia.

This is the first time in UN history that a Telengit takes the floor. It is extremely important for us to tell the global community about the problems of our people.

Until now, we have been able to preserve the traditions of our ancestors, their language and culture, and to lead our traditional way of life in the harsh conditions of the highlands.

Historically, our people have led a nomadic existence, and now depend on management and breeding of livestock. These require pastures, which we are losing today due to the advent of civilization.

Current Russian legislation does not aim to preserve and secure land, water and forest resources for Indigenous Peoples. The lands historically owned by the Telengits are no exception.

There still has not been a single instance when shared lands were secured for the Telengits, due to a number of reasons, including:

- unwillingness of the government authorities to create the conditions that would allow lands to be secured for the Telengits;

- Non-feasibility of obtaining the right of ownership of our lands due to the poverty of our people, and, consequently, a real danger that our lands will be bought up by rich individuals and industrial companies.

Russian legislation allows for free sale of land, water and forest resources. However, in this situation the land of our people could be bought up very quickly, and we could end up as slaves on our own land.

Today we are experiencing a quiet takeover of our land, and any company can buy or sell it without any consideration for our interests and even without our knowledge. There have already been examples of takeovers. The lands of our peoples can be sold quickly to private individuals, and we, the Telengits, cannot secure our land.

For a long time now, we have been trying to create an area of traditional nature management, but keep coming up against inexplicable administrative obstacles.

Another problem facing the Telengits today is the absence of the right to state one's ethnic identity in personal identification documents. Current passports do not have a graph for ethnic identity, while we are often asked for legal proof of our affiliation to our people. We must prove that we are Telengits. In particular, this is necessary in such matters as securing of lands and creation of areas of traditional nature management. In other words, in order to create an area of traditional nature management and preserve our land, we must prove that we are Telengits. But we have lived on this land for centuries. In order to prove one's ethnicity, one has to go through a lengthy court battle. Meanwhile, our lands are changing hands.

From all mentioned above, one can conclude that Russia's state authorities are deliberately creating obstacles to the implementation of Indigenous Peoples' constitutional rights.

This problem must be resolved without delay. A gas pipeline and a road from Russia to China are being planned in our Republic for the near future; this could lead to obliteration of pastures, demolition and desecration of our sacred sites, pollution of our rivers and lakes, and annihilation of the unique nature of Gorny Altai.

The gas pipeline could be routed across our lands, through the Ukok Plateau – a sacred place for all the Turkic peoples of the Sayan Mountains and a UNESCO World Heritage site.

I call upon UN experts to consider the problems my people are facing today, and to help us resolve them.

I believe that my intervention will help us to hold on to our land as the only source of life for our people; the loss of land will lead to irreversible effects, such as the end of our material and spiritual cultures, the loss of our language and the impossibility of future sustainable development.

Thank you!