



**Economic and Social  
Council**

Distr.  
GENERAL

E/CN.4/2005/NGO/235  
9 March 2005

ENGLISH ONLY

---

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS  
Sixty-first session  
Item 15 of the provisional agenda

**INDIGENOUS ISSUES**

**Written statement\* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples International, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[11 February 2005]

---

\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN ALASKA (USA)

Oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in Alaska (USA) is threatening the very survival of the Gwich'in indigenous people and their unique way of living, because the Gwich'in depend on the Porcupine caribou herd (150.000 heads), who will be endangered if the ANWR would be opened to the oil industry.

This refuge was founded following a decision of U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1957 and was confirmed by President Jimmy Carter in 1980. This area has been home to the Gwich'in for more than 20,000 years. Just as their ancestors some 7,000 Gwich'in's still live scattered throughout the region in more than a dozen villages and settlements in Alaska and across the border in Canada. The Gwich'in hunters cannot conceive a life without the caribou herd named after the Porcupine River, the animals cross twice a year during their migrations. The Gwich'in Steering Committee representing this indigenous people's interests is fighting plans to open the ANWR to the oil industry since 1988. Endangered species worthy of protection like grizzly bears, the musk-ox, arctic foxes, wolves and polar and black bears along with around 100 different species of birds live in this area called the "Arctic Serengeti" by environmentalists.

The Porcupine Caribou Herd is time and again crossing the border to Canada migrating back and forth to nature protection areas along the Canadian Arctic coast. In 1987 Canada and the USA therefore signed an agreement for the protection of the Porcupine Caribou herd and her habitat. Opening the ANWR for oil drilling would threaten the survival of the Caribou herd and thereby the survival of the Gwich'in. Therefore, besides environmental damages and the violation of the Gwich'in's basic rights the US- government is risking a conflict with the Canadian neighbours.

For the Gwich'in, the coastal area is a sacred place, as it is there that life itself begins. Many animal conservationists fear that should oil drilling begin, the Porcupine caribou herd will change the route for migration and stay away from the ANWR. The ANWR is the safest place for the animals to give birth and raise their offspring. To drive them away from here would clearly threaten their very existence. The Gwich'in do not only hunt the caribou as a source of nutrition, but use the hide, antlers and bones for the production of clothing and other every-day articles. Caribou are the core of their cultural identity. Innumerable traditions, songs and stories exist about the animals. Even their name, People of the Caribou, gives proof for their close relationship with the animals. "Without the caribous, we would be lost", explains Sarah James from the Gwich'in Steering Committee.

Opening the ANWR for oil drilling is a crucial point for the energy policy of the present US-government, which aims at independence from imports. According to studies of the Resources Committee of the House of Representatives, were the Republican Party is holding a majority, ANWR is said to guarantee long term energy resources as a substitute for imports from Venezuela, Saudi Arabia and Iraq for 30 years. In contrast, other environmental studies only speak of energy resources for six month at most with a start of drilling not before 2013. In addition to the drills the infrastructure of the oil industry (settlements for the workers, roads, helicopter landing ranges, pipelines etc.) will further damage this extreme sensitive, pristine environmental refuge without any prospect for recovery.

Environmentalists together with the Gwich'in fear not only for the survival of the indigenous inhabitants on ANWR and the ANWR itself. They warn that opening the ANWR could become a precedent challenging the status of all nature protection areas in whose borders resources of

economic interest are discovered. They call on the American public and government to focus more on technologies spending less energy rather than destroying nature refuges like ANWR who are home to peoples and animals that are dependent on their inviolability.

The Society for Threatened Peoples International does not deny the fact that some of the indigenous inhabitants of the ANWR who are belonging to the Inupiat Inuit are in favour of oil drilling because they want to use the profit sharing promised to them to enlarge their infrastructure (schools, hospitals etc.). But the Inupiat as well would be threatened to loose their traditional income as whale hunters and hunters of sea mammals. Environmental studies show, that the noise and environmental burdens of the oil drilling so close to the seashore most likely would drive the animals far out to the open sea, making it difficult if not impossible for the hunters who are specialized in hunting close to the coastline to come into reach of their prey.

The Gwich'in Steering committee calls upon respect for the Gwich'in's right to self determination and the right to freely pursue their own political, economic, cultural, social and religious destinies according to the provisions of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, who both guarantee, that a people may not be deprived of their own means of subsistence. The Society for Threatened Peoples International supports this position. The Gwich'in's have a fundamental right of protection for their cultural identity and their joint economic and social structures and traditions.

The Society for Threatened Peoples International calls on the UN Commission on Human Rights to:

- support the demands of the Gwich'in Steering Committee to respect the inherent right of the Gwich'in People to freely pursue their own political, economic, cultural, social and religious destinies;
- urge the United States government to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of the Gwich'in indigenous people in Alaska and to guarantee their right to designate their own future;
- urge a meaningful and binding consultation of the Gwich'in and their prior informed consent as a precondition for any measures aiming at lifting the status of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

- - - - -