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France

Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) is deeply concerned about the situation of the indigenous peoples in France's overseas departments and territories. In French-Guyana indigenous peoples make up for approximately twelve percent of the 150,000 oversea department's inhabitants. While the indigenous Kalina, Palikur and Arawak's area of settlement is located along the Atlantic coast, the Wayana, Teko and Wayapi live reclusively in rain forests in the heartland. The indigenous peoples worry that France's assimilation policy that does not take their culture, tradition and language into account. Social discrimination and alcoholism pose a great problem for all indigenous peoples. More than half of their villages can still not be provided with fresh drinking water. Particularly the Wayana and Teko living in the South of the department are acutely in danger of disappearing, for the gradual destruction of the rainforests ruins their livelihoods. French-Guyana is considered to be a resourceful region in which natural resources are legally and illegally mined on a scale that massively affects the last resorts of indigenous peoples.

Illegal gold mining that has been conducted for more than ten years is especially dangerous. It is mostly conducted by illegal immigrants from Brazil and Surinam who use diggers, motor pumps and heavy equipment for their gold mining on the head waters of the Maroni and Oyapock rivers. These impoverished day labourers are supported by Brazilian backers and unscrupulous common carriers and traders within the department. The common carriers and traders offer their overpriced services to illegal immigrants in order to benefit financially from the inflow of gold-seekers. The gold-seekers are culprits and victims at the same time. They mostly live under inhumane circumstances in their hideouts in the woods, where violence and crime have reached alarming proportions. One out of 20 department's inhabitants currently lives illegally in the Guyanan woods.

The overseas department is plundered and bereft of its natural resources since the biggest part of the extracted noble metal is illegally exported via Brazil. The French authorities only have insufficient measures to stop the inflow of illegal gold seekers and their activities in the rainforest of French-Guyana. Since there are too few gendarmes, helicopters and other means of transportation most gold seekers can enter the department unchecked via the insufficiently secured frontier. Even when illegal immigrants on French territory are found by gendarmes, they rarely have to fear deportation to their country of origin as French authorities neither provide enough money nor means of transportation for the repatriation of these immigrants. In the cases where camps of gold seekers are found by gendarmes, they only manage to destroy a fraction of the machines used for gold-seeking. The destroyed machines are usually replaced within a very short period of time by the gold-seekers and their backers. For the indigenous peoples of French-Guyana this means that several thousand gold-seekers who do not even have to fear serious prosecution destroy their living space unhindered. In the period between 2002 and 2006 gendarmes rendered more than 1,400 water pumps unusable in raids. However, they only confiscated 42 kilograms of gold. According to estimates, illegal gold-seekers mine up to ten tons of gold worth 200 million US-Dollars per year. Legally, only three tons of the noble metal are mined every year in Guyana.

Pursuing a policy of looking the other way and ignoring the ongoing destruction of the traditional area of settlement of indigenous peoples, French authorities endanger the survival of these peoples, and thus deny a part of their own citizens an appropriate protection against infringements. Members of the indigenous peoples are affected of this through rising crime rates, illnesses introduced by the miners and the pollution of their

rivers. The indigenous peoples living in the heartland traditionally live from fishing; hence they especially suffer from the use of mercury for the goldmining. In November 2007, the Wayanas complained that the Waki and Tampock rivers are mercury-polluted. Measurements conducted by independent scientists in September 2005 indicated that within the settlement areas of indigenous peoples along the headwaters of the Maroni River the mercury exposure of children and adults exceeded the acceptable levels determined by the World Health Organization. In the village of Kayode 13.1 micrograms mercury per one gram of hair were diagnosed. The average peak in France is 1.7 micrograms; the critical value set by the World Health Organisation is 10 micrograms.

Apart from illegal gold-seeking indigenous peoples fear the catastrophic consequences of legal commodity mining. The establishment of new gold mines such as the systematic mining of gold at the Kaw Mountain by the transnational corporate group Cambior violate the indigenous peoples' land rights and endanger their survival. For years, indigenous organizations have demanded to have a say in the matter of major projects that affect their living space.

The establishment of a national park decided upon in February 2007 was also criticized by indigenous peoples' organizations. Mining is only forbidden in a core zone of this "Amazon Park". Indigenous peoples criticize that this core zone does not encompass their area of settlement. They worry that the park will allow outsiders an easier entrance to their living space. The decision on the establishment of the national park does not clarify the matter of the indigenous peoples' land rights.

At the overseas territory French-Polynesia in the South Pacific human rights of indigenous peoples have been violated, too. Between 1966 and 1996 France conducted 46 nuclear tests in the atmosphere and 147 underground nuclear tests on the atolls of Moruroa and Fangataufa. Up to 15,000 Maohi-aborigines worked in the nuclear testing facility. Until today French authorities deny the fact that these nuclear tests had negative medical consequences on the Maohi-aborigines and the employees in the nuclear testing facility.

But recent medical surveys showed that 85 per cent of the veterans of the nuclear testing facility suffer from medical problems and that 32.4 per cent got cancer. In France, every year less than one per cent of the population get cancer. Most of the employees of the nuclear testing facility did not wear special protective clothing against the radiation during their work. Either there was no protective clothing or the employees disrobed it because of the heat, since they were not informed about the consequences of radioactive contamination. In a survey conducted among 737 former employees of the nuclear testing facility, 73 per cent stated that at the time of their employment they did not know that they were supposed to work for a nuclear testing program. 41 per cent of the interviewees said that they had to work in areas that were contaminated. 14 per cent even had to work with contaminated material. Though it was forbidden to eat fish coming from the Moruroa lagoon, 55 per cent of the interviewees ignored the ban which had not sufficiently been implemented by the authorities. The fish that was traditionally eaten by the Maohi was not served in the military canteens and could only be found at the Mururoa lagoon.

As their work contract forbade them to speak freely, many Maohi for years did not reveal the severe health consequences of their work in the testing facility. After more and more veterans had died from the consequences of nuclear radiation, in July 2001 the Maohi founded the human rights organization "Association Moruroa e Tatou" in order to represent the veterans' interests and to assert the disclosure of the medical consequences of the nuclear tests. The Maohi demand that French authorities no longer keep the severe medical consequences of the nuclear tests as a secret and take responsibility for these consequences.

The concerned Maohi must receive free medical treatment and compensation for their long-term health problems, childlessness, and inability to work. Surviving members of the families must receive a pension. But so far French authorities have remained unwilling to comply with their fiduciary duty for former employees of the nuclear testing facility. The ministry of health has refused to automatically acknowledge the 31 kinds of cancer that are usually connected with nuclear tests as work-related diseases, as it is common practice in the United States.