

Submission by Society for Threatened Peoples

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Minority languages

1. Once home to a multitude of regional languages and tongues, the monolingualism of modern France is enshrined in Article 2 of the French constitution which prescribes that French should be the one official language. Despite the fact that the French Ministry of Culture and Communication recognizes 14 distinct minority languages in metropolitan France and 47 minority languages in the French overseas territories, the situation of many regional languages still is precarious. Education, the law and public administration are all conducted in standard French. Minority languages are taught in school, but mostly as an optional subject. Bilingual education was introduced in the 1990s in Corsica, Brittany and Alsace/Lorraine. Lack of financial support by the French State and administrative restrictions seriously have endangered the perspectives of associative schools providing a minimum of bilingual education.
2. As a first positive step French Parliament in July 2008 voted in favour of constitutional reforms. Since the revision in 2008 Article 2 of the French Constitution is supplemented by Article 75, paragraph 1: "Regional languages are part of France's heritage". The reputed French Academy reacted angrily to the proposal of the parliamentarians, claiming that the inclusion of regional languages in the Constitution constituted an "Attack on national identity". Members of the French Academy had been particularly upset by the fact that regional languages were to be mentioned ahead of French in Article 2 of the Constitution, despite the fact that the reference to regional languages in no way compromised the supremacy of French as official language. Within a week the Senate, the French upper house of parliament, voted against the amendment after it had been approved by the lower chamber of parliament. Finally the modifications were adopted but Article 75 does not offer any new right.
3. Article 2 of the Constitution has been an obstacle to the ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. This European Convention has been adopted in 1992 under the auspices of the Council of Europe to protect and promote regional and minority languages. The Charter contains 98 articles of which signatories must adopt a minimum of 35. France already has signed 35 Provisions in 1999, but unfortunately has declined to ratify the Charter. The Constitutional Council of France

declared that the Charter contains unconstitutional provisions since the Constitution states that the official language is French.

4. In March 2012 thousands of protesters took to the streets all over France to urge the government to finally ratify and enact the European Charter. It's a sign of hope that France new President Francois Hollande has announced that he is in favor of recognizing regional languages and ratifying the European Charter.

Indigenous peoples in French Polynesia

5. French nuclear testing in the South Pacific had a huge impact on the indigenous Maohi population in French Polynesia. Due to international pressure France stopped nuclear testing on the island of Moruroa in 1995. Although the French authorities have affirmed that they have monitored sufficiently the effect of their nuclear tests on the environment, they have made no effort to analyze the impact of the testing program on the health of the indigenous population on neighboring islands and on the Maohi workers in the test site facilities. The nongovernmental organization "Moruroa e Tatou", is regrouping former workers from the test site and indigenous people living on neighboring islands and has been urging the French authorities to accept an independent research mission to analyze the impact of the nuclear tests and the nuclear waste on the health and environment in the islands. Unfortunately no comprehensive and credible study taking into account the testimonies of thousands of former Maohi staff of the test site has been made until yet.
6. Seventeen years after the last nuclear test was held in the Pacific, Maohi islanders still are living with the legacy of hundreds of atmospheric and underground nuclear tests while fighting for compensation and recognition of radiation-related health problems. Most of the former Maohi workers on the test site and foreign experts are convinced that nuclear testing has caused widespread radioactive contamination and an increase in cancer diseases. The inhabitants of the Gambier Islands in the Southeast of French Polynesia have been urging the French Defence Ministry for access to official files describing the impact on their health of 30 years of nuclear testing. Unfortunately the French authorities still are reluctant to offer access to valuable data on the medical situation on these islands and to provide compensation for Maohi victims of nuclear testing. Veterans of the French army and marine have been able to obtain compensation under the strict regulations of the "Directive Morin", but Maohi victims mostly are unable to launch expensive legal procedures to obtain compensation. The access of Maohi victims to compensation should be facilitated and more medical data should be provided by the authorities in order to launch a comprehensive study on the impact of French nuclear testing. Furthermore the geological risks of a break-up of the island of Moruroa, a giant nuclear waste storage, independently should be analyzed.

Indigenous population in the overseas department of French Guyana

7. The indigenous peoples of French Guyana have been suffering from an increasing rate of suicides in recent years. The destruction of their traditional habitat and livelihood in the rainforest, the illegal intrusion of gold diggers from neighboring Brazil and Suriname and new infrastructure and legal mining projects have been endangering the survival of indigenous peoples in remote areas in the south of French Guyana. Illegal gold mining has a massive impact on the environment and the health of indigenous communities. Due to illegal mining up to 10.000 hectares of rainforest were destroyed in French Guyana in recent years. The use of mercury by gold diggers has polluted the most important rivers and the fish which traditionally is of greatest importance to local indigenous fishermen. Scientific research established that some fishes in areas of illegal gold mining have been up to 100.000 times more polluted than in other zones of the river. Therefore in many indigenous villages the population is suffering from mercury pollution after consuming polluted fish. Especially indigenous children are suffering from mercury pollution which sometimes is exceeding four to six times the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO).

8. France should intensify its efforts to stop illegal mining. In most cases French security officials are lacking experienced staff and equipment to effectively combat the cartels of illegal gold diggers. It's not sufficient to register illegal activities without destroying the equipment of the miners. France should provide more support for its security in order to ensure a better protection of the livelihood of indigenous peoples and of the rainforest.

9. It's a positive step that France has forbidden any mining activities in the south of French Guyana in January 2012. Now, some 45 % of French Guyana has been put under official protection against mining activities. Unfortunately in the remaining 45.000 square kilometers in the north of the country, multinational mining companies have been concentrating and intensifying their activities.

10. To guarantee a better protection of its indigenous population in French Guyana, France should sign and ratify ILO-Convention 169 which provides basic human rights for indigenous peoples.