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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, 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.

[03 June 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Indigenous peoples in the Russian Arctic and consequences of the COVID-19 crisis

Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) is very concerned about a growing threat to indigenous peoples in the Russian Arctic by COVID-19. The oil and gas boom in the Polar Regions brings large construction sites with frequently changing work teams to their territory. Due to overcrowded living quarters and poor health care, those work teams very often carry the Corona virus into indigenous territories, threatening the survival of indigenous peoples. The virus spreads rapidly. In the North of the Russian Federation, there are the highest numbers of corona virus infections. The Sami, Nenets, Komi and other indigenous peoples pay a high price for the Russian Federation's economic growth.

Oil and gas companies expand their projects at the cost of indigenous rights and the environment. The Russian gas company Novatek confirmed in May 2020 that the construction of a new factory near the city of Murmansk for the production of natural gas drilling platforms in the Arctic Ocean will continue despite the fact that even according to official information 206 people on the Belokamenka construction site on Kola Bay were infected with the virus at the time. COVID-19 is also spreading in the natural gas fields on the Yamal peninsula further East. The affected facilities are mainly operated by the Gazprom group. Personnel at this natural gas company are held responsible for the increase in COVID-19 infections. After the death of an infected Gazprom employee, many indigenous Nenets living on the peninsula doubt whether they are receiving adequate medical care and tests for possible infections.

COVID-19 has left the oil industry reeling since the pandemic began, from travel restrictions, to the disruption of supply chains, to price wars. Because of this, COVID-19 also serves as an excuse for a shift in the balance of power. The Arkhangelsk Oblast and the Nenets Autonomous Okrug (NAO) in Russia's Northwestern Arctic announced on 13 May 2020 in joint news releases that they are planning to merge. Ninety per cent of the NAO's budget depends on oil prices and with no end to the pandemic in sight, joining into a single entity could provide an economic buffer, the governments said.

However, the decision was made without the approval of the Nenets living in the area, who oppose the merger. In a letter dated May 10, 2020, the council of elders of the regional public movement "Yasavey" Association of the Nenets People in the Autonomous Circle of Nenets expressed concern that the merger could weaken their rights as indigenous reindeer herders. Economic benefits would hardly arise for the Nenets, only for the oil and gas industry.

The chairman of the board of the Union of Reindeer herders in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug (NAO) confirms the rejection of the merger by the Nenets reindeer herders. As an alternative solution, the Union of Reindeer Breeders proposed restoring historical justice and reunite the Nenets Autonomous Circles, the Yamal Nenets Autonomous Circles and the Dolgano Nenets Autonomous Circles, as well as parts of the areas of Workutinsky, Intinsky and Ust-Zilömsky of the Komi Republic as areas of the original residence of the Nenets indigenous peoples as one territory. The Nenets territory was divided between 1929 and 1931.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council to urge the Government of the Russian Federation to:

- suspend new major gas and oil projects in the Russian Arctic to curb the spread of COVID-19,
- respect the basic rights of the Nenets indigenous peoples in the Arctic to have a say in decision-making about the borders of their territory,
- respect the basic rights of all indigenous peoples in the Arctic to physical integrity given the dramatic consequences of the rapid spread of COVID-19,
- respect the rules and regulations of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), especially the right to free prior informed consent.