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Japan's Indigenous People and Unrecorded Slow Genocide

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□□First people in the Japanese Archipelago and official recognition in 2008

Japanese ruling LDP politicians have repeated many times that Japan is a homogeneous state, having no people belonging to other ethnic groups, despite very clear evidence that Ainu people used to live in northeastern Honshu, the whole of Hokkaido, and the adjacent islands (the Kurils and southern Sakhalin) from the prehistoric time of Japan. At present, they are now mainly living in Hokkaido island/prefecture. The word "AINU" *me*ans "human being" in the Ainu language.

The number of Ainu people is officially unknown, as there has not been any recognition or survey. The Hokkaido prefectural Government's survey conducted in 2006 reveals that 23,782 persons living in Hokkaido (approx. 0.42% of the Hokkaido population) acknowledge themselves as Ainu. But a date accessed says that about 150,000 Ainu people are living in Hokkaidō, the Kuril Islands, and much of Sakhalin[1]. After decades of intermarriage with the Japanese, and also due to various forms of discrimination by Japanese against this minority group, it is now rare to encounter a person purely of Ainu blood.

Group of Ainu people, 1902 photographed
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ainupeople)

The Ainu people were officially recognized as the indigenous people of Japan by the Japanese Government only in 2008, just before the G-8 Summit held in Hokkaido in July 2008, as the result of many [illegible]ndards have

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ainu_people

been much lower than the average for Japanese people. Following are a few examples:

1) The population ratio of Ainu people receiving Livelihood Protection money is 1.6 times that of Japan's population ratio, and
2) Ainu people's higher education enrollment ratio is only 17.4% against 38.5%, the Japan's average.

Following the official recognition, the current Japanese Government has been preparing a comprehensive package of plans to improve Ainu people's living standards. But we are afraid that some important points, such as the rights of indigenous peoples recognized by the "Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples", will not be well appreciated by our Government.

2. Oppression & Exploitation of Ainu People in the Edo Period

Until the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate (Edo Period) in 1867, Hokkaido was Ainu people's exclusive domicile. But Japan's merchants backed by feudal Samurai lords located in the most northern part of Honshu Island severely exploited Ainu people through unfair trade and taxations.

Ainu people resisted these human oppressions, with occasional revolts, such as Shakshin's Revolt in 1669 and the Menashi-Kunashir Battle in 1789. Unfortunately Ainu people were defeated in these revolts. For instance, 37 or more Ainu people, who actively participated in the Menashi-Kunashir Battle, were executed by a feudal lord.

After the end of each war, exploitation of Ainu people was intensified with their being treated almost like slaves. As a result, their living conditions further deteriorated, leading Ainu people to a slow death.

3. Genocidal "Forced Relocations" in the early Meiji Era

The Meiji Government, which led Japan's modernization since 1867, decided to treat Hokkaido Island as its domestic colony. A large number of Japanese people, some who were originally Samurai warriors, migrated to Hokkaido, and deprived Ainu people of their land and marginalized them further. The Hokkaido Former Natives Protection Act of 1899, systematically eliminated the Ainu language, religion, customs, such as tattooing and wearing earrings, and lifestyles.

As a part of Japan's modern nation-state building, the Japanese Government signed a treaty with Russia to clarify the boundary between Japan and Russia. Under this treaty, Japan gave up Sakhalin, but kept the entire Kuril island chain, regardless of the people living in those areas.

This resulted in two "Forced Relocations" of Ainu people from the border areas.

3-1. Shahalin Ainu: Shahalin Island became a part of Russia. According to official records, there were 555 Japanese, 1,100 Russians and 2,378 Ainu people in Sahalin in 1873. Out of these 2,378 Ainu people, 841 people were forcibly taken to Hokkaido Island from 1875 to 1887. Changes of living environment and diet patterns caused stress among them and weakened their health. Also due to a series of cholera epidemics from 1879 to 1887, out of 841 Ainu people, 385 died.

3-2. Kuril Ainu: The entire Kuril Island chain came under Japan's territory, but people living there, mainly Ainu, Aleuts and Russians were forced to choose their nationalities, and then leave the islands for security reasons. Out of 106 Ainu people, 9 chose Russia, but the rest, 97, became Japanese by default. They were taken to Shikotan island in 1884. But by 1889, 22 men and 27 women (about 50%) died, out of 97. The authorities issued a report on this pointing out that primarily the shock of having been moved to a totally new environment was the main cause of this tragedy.

4. Documentation on School Textbooks

As explained in my previous presentation at the 1st Conference, all textbooks used in Primary, Junior-High & High Schools, published by several private companies following the Japanese Government's official guideline for teaching, must be checked by the Ministry of Education in Japan, despite Freedom of Expression in the Japanese Constitution. For instance, 103 textbooks of Junior-High School for 9 subjects were remarked at 4854 points in a recent year. Each local government has to select text books of all subjects among several choices for its public schools.

So the related descriptions in the existing textbooks well reflects the level of the government's understanding of the Ainu issue, and also creates the general people's understanding of Ainu people. In other words, if we can change the Japanese Government's official guidelines for teaching, we can improve people's understanding.

At present, most textbooks of Japanese history describe the Ainu issue in only one page, others use only a few pages. Many of them mention about Japan's violent oppression and invasion of Hokkaido, combating with Ainu's occasional resistances and their assimilation in the Meiji era. But it is rarely mentioned that Ainu were the first people in Japan and their rights and lands were gradually taken away by the present Japanese who arrived on the Japanese Islands later and expanded its territory toward the northern parts of Japan which were originally governed by the Ainu.

It is always not easy to talk about indigenousness of each area of land and especially about indigenous people's rights, as it may sometimes jeopardize national sovereignty. But I would like to assert that liberal citizens' movements can play important roles to promote talks on these kind of sensitive issues and break the national myth.

Japan committed some serious mistakes with indigenous peoples, such as the Ainu in the beginning of its modern nation building. This might have happened to any country in a similar situation. I sincerely hope that Bangladesh would learn well from the histories of other countries and be able to deal with indigenous and minority peoples of the land in appropriate ways.

(End)

(Data in Chapter 3 are mainly from Miyajima Toshimitsu, "Land of Elms", translated by Robert Witmer, United Church Publishing House, Canada, 1998)