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Climate Change Hitting Russia's Northern People First and Hardest

By Paul Goble

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VIENNA &mdash Climate change is hitting Russia's numerically small peoples of the North sooner and harder than it is affecting other groups, experts say, noting with regret that the problems of these groups are not scheduled to be discussed at the upcoming Copenhagen meeting on global warming.

Yesterday, Viktor Danilov-Danilyan, a corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and vice president of the Russian Ecological Academy, and Olga Murashko, a spokesperson for the association of the peoples of the Russian North and Far East, talked about these problems at a Moscow news conference.

While most of the questions at that session concerned the causes of climate change and the consequences of such change for residents of major Russian cities, two of the 32 queries were about the possible impact of climate change on the indigenous population of the Russian North.

In response to these questions, Danilov-Danilyan said the changes in the High North of Russia will be "the most significant" and that "it is possible that by the end of the century, the tundra (except in mountainous areas) in general will not remain. And correspondingly, there will be no reindeer or traditional hunting animals."

Murashko provided additional details. She noted that the indigenous population of the North is already feeling "the negative impact" of climate change on their traditional ways of life. Reindeer herds are dying out, and the industrial development of the region has destroyed many alternative forms of economic activity.

Unfortunately, she continued, "these problems are not being studied in Russia," nor are representatives of the indigenous peoples being asked for their views on the changes that are taken place, "even though no one is better placed to do so than the indigenous peoples of the North" because these changes are "vitally important" for their survival.

Equally unfortunate is the fact that Russia is not the only country that is neglecting the numerically small peoples of the North. The upcoming climate talks in Copenhagen are scheduled to discuss the impact of climate change on the peoples of Greenland and Canada, but "a discussion of the problems of the indigenous peoples of the North of Russia is not planned."

And for that to happen, Russians in the capital need to change their view: "The point of view on the consequences of climate change from the window of a Moscow apartment differ in a major way from the point of view of a reindeer shepherd who perhaps now in order to save his herd from hunger" will have to take steps that Muscovites cannot even imagine.

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