

Native peoples oppose uranium mining

Representatives of native peoples met in Denmark recently to discuss the problem of uranium mines on their lands. **Roger Moody** reports

THE First International Conference on Uranium Mining in the Third and Fourth Worlds was remarkable, not only in its attendance of 500 anti-nuclear activists and representatives from the developing world, but in the fact that it occurred at all. Held in Copenhagen on 25-27 October, the conference was organised at short notice by three Danish anti-nuclear groups.

Taking advantage of the fact that two US Indian delegates, Winona LaDuke and Herb Blatchford were visiting Europe (see *Nature*, 11 October 1979), the Danish anti-nuclear group 'OOA' issued invitations to activists and representatives of native peoples from Africa, Australia and Greenland.

Just three weeks before the conference, the ruling Siumut party in Greenland had strongly condemned the involvement of their economy in the nuclear age precipitated by an energy-hungry EEC. In particular Siumut vetoed further immediate development of the Narssarsuaq uranium deposit (27,000 tonnes) on the far south-western tip of Greenland. And by coincidence, two Australian Aborigines also happened to be visiting Europe at the time of the conference. They were trying to set up an Aboriginal information centre one of whose aims would be to work for a moratorium on the development of the Ranger, Nabarlek and Jabiluka deposits, all on Aboriginal land in the deep Australian north.

Mick Miller of the North Queensland Land Council, the largest single body representing any of Australia's original people, talked about the struggle for land rights, pointing out that Aborigines had been aware of the potentially devastating nature of uranium "thousands of years ago". Using the powerful images of Aborigine culture, Miller told of an Aborigine belief about the land on which the Ranger mine is due to go on stream around 1981. The story has been told through generations that if the earth is disturbed on this spot, *gabo djang* (green ants) will rise through the crust and destroy the world.

Herb Blatchford's forebears had also sensed the enormous importance of the 'Four Corners' area into which they moved and settled 4000 years ago (the Four

John F. Racmussen.

The Narssarsuaq seaboard: Greenland has vetoed further development of uranium

Corners comprises New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Arizona). However, when uranium mining started in New Mexico (initially for US nuclear weapons) about 30 years ago none of the Navajo or Pueblo people in the Four Corners was told the full extent of what was going on: "We asked — why do we feel the nausea, see our hair fall out, why do our teeth weaken, why do we get up in the morning and have no breath? We went to books, looked back at history. Then we went to the Japanese. We went to Enuwetok atoll and asked them. Then we went to the Nevada Platte people. They all gave us the same answer: *Radiation.*"

Greenland's delegates seemed unaware of the full implications of allowing uranium mining on their land. Robert Petersen (surely the only Inuit eskimologist in the country) received polite applause when he reflected the Siumut position that mining should only proceed "if all the dangers of radioactive pollution and waste dumping are solved". Of one thing, Petersen was quite certain: "The mine cannot be a solution to the increasing unemployment among our people. If Narssarsuaq goes ahead, it will produce only a few jobs for our people, and bring in even more outsiders."

Another Greenlander took issue with Petersen on this, and became the only delegate to approve of mining "provided the safety problems are solved" since "we must have an economic base on which Home Rule can work". Jorgen Hertling is a member of the Atassut party which has strong links with Denmark, Greenland's former colonial rulers.

The two high spots of the conference were both unexpected. Immediately after Hertling left the platform — to stony silence — two young Greenlanders rose to announce (in both Inuit and English) that they had just decided to form an anti-uranium mining group in their country. During the next few months, they will travel round the scattered seaboard communities mobilising against the Narssarsuaq project, and strengthening the veto already imposed on it. (There is a

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widespread fear among Greenlanders that the Danish government will override the veto, under pressure from the EEC.)

But most surprising was the address given by the only 'Third World' delegate, Hadino Hishongwa from Namibia. Hishongwa is the South West Africa Peoples' Organisation (SWAPO) representative in the Nordic countries, Austria and West Germany. Although opposition to foreign control of Rössing, the world's largest operating uranium mine (1978 production: 5000 tonnes uranium oxide), received majority support in the UN Assembly four years ago, SWAPO has never argued against uranium mining as such until now.

"Uranium is an evil", announced Hishongwa. "It is a threat to Namibia and a threat to the entire world. SWAPO doesn't want to exploit it, even when we are independent."

As well as the Rössing mine (in which Britain's Rio Tinto Zinc Corporation has a 46.5% beneficial interest), South Africa's huge General Mining Corporation and France's Aquitaine are involved in prospecting further uranium lodes in the Swakopmund area, and Namibia's actual deposits could rival those in Gabon and Niger.

So ended a conference which was rather short on facts, somewhat higher on energy and certainly bounding with rhetoric. Whether native or 'natural' peoples in the developing world live on 80% (as was claimed by the conference organisers, OOA) or 40% (my own estimate) of the West's reasonably assured uranium reserves, they are certainly the most vulnerable groups. And if uranium exploration and mining expands by up to 150% — as this year's Uranium Institute's annual symposium proposed it should — future conferences should see greater representation from native peoples who did not hear about, or could not get to, the Copenhagen gathering. □

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