Gold mining in Khakasia and its impact on the lives of the Shors

In addition to open-pit coal mining, which has had a major impact on Shors, a small-numbered Indigenous group from South Siberia, gold mining companies are also expropriating Indigenous Peoples’ lands where they have led their traditional lifestyles for centuries, polluting the environment, and destroying Indigenous cultural sites. The companies involved in gold mining neither follow Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) processes, nor pay taxes in the municipalities where they operate. Thus gold mining not only puts at risk the very survival of the Shor traditional way of life and livelihoods, but also doesn’t benefit them in any way economically.

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At least eight placer mines were operating in close proximity to Shor villages, on the rivers Magyza, Balyksu, Bolshoy Nazas, Zaslonka, Orton, Fedorovka, Bazas and some others. All of these water bodies together are the most important form of sustenance for the Shors, as they are the only source of drinking water for their villages, livestock, and the wild animals of the taiga, which are the foundation of the Shor economy. The disappearance of fish due to waste discharged into the rivers by the placer mines deprives the Shor of an irreplaceable element of their diet, and the wild animals that eat the fish have migrated to remote areas that hunters cannot access.
Formally, the Shor villages should be protected by law from commercial exploitation, as they are on the Federal List of Places of Traditional Residence and Activities of Small Indigenous Peoples and, in case of Shor lands within Khakasia, are included within the borders of “specially protected territories of traditional nature use”, where any activity that threatens the condition of natural resources is prohibited. However, despite such legal protection the scale of gold mining and the number of gold-mining cooperatives in Khakasia and Kemerovo Oblast have drastically increased over the past five years.

**Pollution of rivers and streams**

Since gold is mined from the upper reaches of rivers, water bodies are the most severely impacted as waste flows downstream. Residents of Askizsky District say that Khakasia Gold-Mining Cooperative has been regularly discharging untreated water into the Balyksu. In 2020, the water of the Balyksu River was found to exceed the permitted concentration of pollutants like iron, copper, zinc and petroleum products, as well as baseline indicators, by a factor of five. Meanwhile, the state environmental supervision bodies often don’t recognize such violations.

In Kemerovo Oblast, the gold-mining company Novy Bazas, whose licensed plot stretches for 32 kilometers, polluted the Bazas and Orton rivers, as well as their numerous tributaries and streams that supply the villages of Orton, Trekhrechye and Ilyinka with water. Water resources, including many kinds of fish, have suffered greatly from pollution. In one case, in the spring and summer of 2021 some residents of Trekhrechye got food poisoning from eating them. Local residents’ complaints to the district administration, supervisory bodies, and the prosecutor’s office were ignored.

One aspect that poses the greatest danger to rivers is artificially shifting their course. Gold miners use this technique to get as much gold as they can out of their licensed plot. They move the stream of water to the artificial riverbed and mine the gold remaining in the old riverbed. However, when they finish with the plot, they don’t move the riverbed back. This makes the rivers grow shallow and become polluted with toxic elements like petroleum
products, manganese and mercury, which accumulates in the soil in areas affected by mining.

Changing the river’s course causes obstructions in winter when the ice breaks up, which means that villages are flooded in the spring. In addition, during this process, the bottom flattens out (becomes level) and the water starts to have less oxygen, which normally forms due to the many cavities, stones and other natural objects on the riverbed. The river becomes warmer and is covered with blue-green algae in the summer, while the usual flora and fauna disappear.

Due to the removal of the rock mass, the flooded quarries occupy huge territories. These quarries are deeper than the level of rivers, so water from all nearby water sources drains into them. Many artificial lakes start appearing where there were once forests and fields. In the spring, the water level in these lakes rises, causing flooding that wipes out terrestrial flora and fauna.

**Illegal activities, lack of remediation**

Even during the pre-mining exploration process, a huge number of ecosystems are affected. In 2021, residents of the Shor villages of Orton, Ilyinka, Uchas and Trekhrechye in Kemerovo Oblast, had to contend with illegal geological exploration work conducted by the privately-owned gold-mining company Novy Bazas, which left agricultural lands decimated and polluted with construction waste. Similar violations of environmental laws were recorded in Askizsky District, Khakasia, where areas used for livestock grazing, haymaking and berry- and mushroom-foraging were ruined as a result of the Khakassia Gold-Mining Cooperative’s activities.

Mining also has a devastating impact on the fauna of the region. Hazel grouse, wood grouse, elk and sable have almost completely disappeared from the forest areas bordering Shor villages. Many placer mines are located in the migration paths of hoofed animals like deer, moose and others. During their seasonal migrations in the spring and fall, the noise from the
mines and the changed landscape cause animals stress and force them to look for new places to live. And, naturally, fish cannot spawn in places where gold is being mined.

In accordance with current environmental protection laws, gold-mining companies are responsible for environmental remediation of the lands affected by mining. However, despite gold miners’ promises to do this, these obligations are rarely, if ever, fulfilled. Even though residents have complained and there have been clear cases of environmental pollution, the licenses of gold mining companies operating near Shor villages have never been revoked or suspended.

**Mining licenses without FPIC**

The Shor community has been almost completely excluded from the decision-making process of whether to issue a license for a territory of traditional activities. For example, residents of the Shor village of Neozhidanny (Khakasia) only learned that these lands had been given to gold mining cooperatives when heavy equipment appeared in close proximity to their village and industrial work and forest clearance started.

The agricultural plots of many of the village’s residents were destroyed, and the only road leading from the village to the cemetery and places for hunting and foraging in the woods was blocked by a checkpoint that only workers were allowed through. While authorities claim that the public hearing took place with the presence of local Shors, representatives of the communities in question themselves say that none of them participated in the hearings or even knew about them.

An identical situation occurred in the Shor villages of Orton, Trekhrechye, Uchas and Ilyinka (Kemerovo Oblast). In recent years at least three licenses were granted for placer mining near the Shor villages without holding any public hearings.

**Gold mining brings no benefits to the Shors**

While causing so much harm to the territories where the Shors traditionally reside, almost none of the abovementioned gold mining companies are registered with the municipal
districts where they process the subsoil. Subsequently they pay taxes elsewhere, which means that local budgets do not receive economic benefits from the mining activities. Thus, the Shors, who are surrounded by gold mining plots, do not receive any benefits from the mining companies.

The traditional localities where the Shors of Khakasia and Kemerovo Oblast live do not have stores, schools, medical facilities or proper roads connecting these villages with district centers. The unemployment rate in areas where the Shors traditionally reside is nearly 40% higher than the average rate for the region. In this situation, the only sources of cash income are agriculture and the products of traditional trades like hunting, fishing and foraging. There are also fewer and fewer traditional economic activities that are viable because of the adverse impact of operations on the environment.

Hunting on traditional Shor lands is complicated not just by the worsening environmental situation, but by the fact that the mines simply do not allow hunters to access hunting areas. And when local people protest loudly against mining operations, blocking hunting lands is often used as a threat. Unfortunately, the mines have leverage. For example, one of the senior managers at the Pay-Cher-Z cooperative is both the lease holder of a forest plot and the owner of a private hunting business that borders Shor hunting grounds. This contradicts the Federal Law “On Wildlife” that envisages the right of Indigenous Peoples to have preferential use of wildlife on territories of traditional settlement.

**Challenges for the Shors**

The fact that the Shors are in a category of small-numbered Indigenous Peoples under the special protection of Russian law should have guaranteed their development and well-being, but in reality they are gradually losing their habitual places of residence, activities and income because of gold and coal mining. This is a threat to their identity, language, culture and their very existence. Compared to other Indigenous Peoples living in the Russian Federation, the Shors have a high level of urbanization, which is undoubtedly a consequence of the activities of mining companies and general state policy.
Currently, it is important to disseminate information about such violations of the rights of Indigenous Peoples as widely as possible in order to ensure a prosperous life for those Shors who continue leading a traditional lifestyle. Recently, the efforts of activists and human rights defenders helped to start public dialogue on the issue of alluvial gold mining. Thus, in October 2021, it became known that the government of Khakasia was considering a moratorium on issuing licenses to gold mining companies.

This article was produced by Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial, a Brussels-based NGO working on the protection of the rights of vulnerable groups in the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, including the rights of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples. The issues of Shor indigenous people have been raised by ADC Memorial in a number of Human Rights reports and statements based on field data and submitted to the international bodies like the UN Committees and Special Procedures, mechanisms of the Council of Europe.