

# Norway's Saami seek self-government

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**KAUTOKEINO, NORWAY** — "Today the Saami should fix their gaze on other Native residents' problems," says Aslak Nils Sara of Kautokeino. "We can't but voice alarm over their present conditions. These people try to survive though they stand at the lowest social level."

Sara is so well versed in this problem he knows it better than anyone in Norway. He is former vice president and now board member of the World Indigenous People's Council.

Its next congress will be held in Troms, Norway, in 1990. Sara holds that it is high time to take political decisions on the present and future life of the indigenous population.

"For many ethnic minorities the main problem is whether they'll be able to live as individuals and distinctive groups of people," Sara said. "They drag out a miserable existence in big cities. In many countries the local authorities don't care a bit about them."

"Whole groups of indigenous people are dying out. Aborigines are treated like kangaroos in such a rich country as Australia. Indians make up 70 percent of the residents of Lima shanties. Native inhabitants of Pacific islands have been turned into guinea pigs for nuclear tests. The authorities oppressing the Native population must be called to account."

"The world public should pay no less attention to the ethnic minorities' problems than to apartheid in South Africa."

Sara believes that television could help raise a fund for economic aid to the indigenous population.

It is only in recent years that Saami living in the Northern countries have become involved in international affairs.

For many years Sara headed the North Saami Institute in Kautokeino. At present he chairs the government consultative body on Saami problems and is director of the Bajos reindeer-breeding organization.

Sara has long stressed the need to establish a Saami parliament. Elections to the first Saami parliament will be held this year.

"Such a parliament will make it possible to regulate relations between the Saami and the majority of the Norwegian population," Sara said. "The Saami are an ethnic group and need to have their own representative body."

Some claim that racist sentiment underlies the idea of a Saami parliament, since all Saami will be registered.

"This is nonsense," says Sara. "Only people themselves can elect a representative body. Registration doesn't run counter to our political system. This 'argument' was invented by those who wish to justify their resistance to elections."

Norwegian political parties will also take part in the upcoming elections. Asked whether the new Saami body may become just a forum for traditional party debates, Sara says:

"Such a threat does exist. But this parliament will be elected by the Saami and for the Saami. Norwegian political parties are also admitted to the elections. But they are expected to set forth their stand on Saami problems."

"In this way we'll make the political parties exchange their views on the subject. Such discussions were held in the past. To debar the political parties from voting would mean to violate the democratic principles of our society. Besides, the Saami want to take part

in the political parties' activities and contribute to their parliament's work."

Sara believes that in the future Saami should enjoy greater self-government.

"Just several years ago it seemed incredible that the Saami language would be granted official status," he notes. "Today this is considered a

matter of course. The Saami lived on their land even before the establishment of the Norwegian state and have the right to their history and culture."

"We're not going to oppose the Saami to the Norwegians or break off all ties between them," Sara continues. "The Saami must be given the responsibility to preserving and developing their language, inimitable

culture, and way of life."

"Norwegian-speaking Saami going to the Finnmarken inland should know that their children will study the Saami language at local schools. We do this not out of separatist sentiment, but to preserve our traditions."

Sara also learned the Saami language as an adult. Today he clearly sees the mistakes made by the Norwegian government in solving his people's problems. Work at the World Indigenous People's Council helps him extend his knowledge and gain more experience.

"For a long time nothing was done to resolve the Saami's problems," Sara said. "Thus, no programs are yet broadcast in the Saami language because the Saami's problems are only tackled centrally, on a nationwide scale. But the political climate in regard to the Saami is changing. It's high time we paid heed to the disastrous situation of ethnic minorities in other parts of the world."