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The Jarawa in India

Survival for Tribal Peoples - Newsletter

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Danger in paradise

Survival's latest campaign concerns the Jarawa tribe of the Andaman Islands - a tiny cluster of palm-fringed islets in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The government of India, to which the islands belong, is poised to make decisions which could mean the difference between the Jarawa's survival and annihilation.

The Jarawa, who are thought to number between 200 and 400, are nomadic hunter-gatherers who have survived for thousands of years in their rainforest home. They hunt game such as wild pigs and monitor lizards, catch fish with bows and arrows and gather seeds and berries. Like the other tribes of the Andamans their origins are unknown: recent theories suggest they may have come originally from Africa.

In the past few months some Jarawa have, for unknown reasons, begun to leave their forest territory to visit nearby villages and even towns (besides the indigenous tribal people, more than 250,000 Indians have settled in the islands over the last 150 years, encouraged first by the British, then by the Indian government). Local settlers and tourists, attracted by the novelty of a tribe which is only now beginning to make peaceful contact with the

outside world, have been giving them clothes and food. These interactions, however well-intentioned, could be disastrous without careful medical supervision, as they put the Jarawa at great risk of catching diseases such as influenza to which they have no immunity. Such diseases are often fatal to uncontacted tribal people. One Jarawa child has already had a traffic accident needing both hands amputated as a result.

Of the four tribes of the Andamans (the Jarawa, the 'Sentinelese', the 'Great Andamanese' and the Ongel) only the Jarawa and the 'Sentinelese' have survived the onslaught of settlement so far. The 'Sentinelese' live on their own island, North Sentinel, and little is known of their life, beyond that they are thought to number between 50 and 200. The Jarawa are not so lucky - they inhabit the west coasts of South and Middle Andaman, two large islands which have been the focus of much of the Indian immigration to the Andamans.

The fate of the other two tribes of the Andamans does not augur well for the Jarawa's future. When the British first set up a colony on the islands in 1857, there were more than 5,000 'Great Andamanese'. After some initial hostility the 'Andamanese' befriended the British, and swiftly succumbed to diseases such as measles and influenza. There are now only 28 'Great Andamanese', and they are entirely dependent on the 'now Indian' local authorities for food and shelter. They have been moved to an island reserve and live in what have been called 'breeding centres'. A similar fate has befallen the Ongel, now

Many of the newly-contacted Jarawa have been given clothes by the Indian settlers, embarrassed by their 'nakedness', considering it a sign of backwardness.

