

ANDAMANS

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INDIA: World's most isolated tribe resists contact

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In January the Sentinelese tribe of the Andaman Islands dramatically made clear their wish to maintain their total isolation from the outside world. The tribe, who live on tiny North Sentinel Island, killed two men who had illegally approached their island. The tragic incident highlighted the failure of the Indian government to uphold and protect the land rights of all the tribes of the Andaman Islands.

The Sentinelese are the most isolated of the four tribes of the islands, and probably the most isolated tribe in the world. Nobody outside the tribe speaks their language, or even knows what they call themselves. They hunt and gather in the forest, and fish in the coastal waters of their island. They live in communal huts with several hearths, and travel the sea using outrigger canoes. Their number is unknown, but is believed to be between 50 and 200. Like the other tribes of the Andaman Islands, the Sentinelese are thought to have migrated from Africa up to 60,000 years ago.

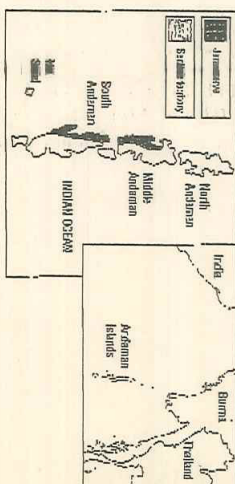
In the late 1980s and early 1990s, armed wreckage salvagers went to North Sentinel to salvage iron and other goods from a shipwreck, and killed many Sentinelese. Now, as

the coastline belonging to the neighbouring Jarawa tribe is heavily used for illegal fishing, poachers are also fishing and diving for lobster around North Sentinel. It is illegal to go within five kilometres of the island.

After the December 2004 tsunami, the Sentinelese fired arrows and threw rocks at a helicopter flying over to see if they had survived. They have consistently shown that they do not want any contact whatsoever with outsiders.

The local authorities have made various unsuccessful attempts to establish contact with the tribe. Although these 'contact missions' have officially stopped, there are concerns that pleasure trips by officials will still be made or that contact missions may be reinstated. It is vital that the wishes of the Sentinelese to remain isolated be respected. Contact with the outside world could very quickly wipe them out through exploitation, violence, and diseases to which they have no immunity.

The other relatively isolated tribe of the islands, the Jarawa, established peaceful contact with Indian settlers in 1998 after many years of government contact missions. They are now in serious danger. Local and Burmese poachers are entering



their realm from the coast and via the sea that runs through their territory. Poachers spend days at a time in the reserve, and persuade Jarawa to hunt pigs and deer for them in return for alcohol, tobacco and rice. Local officials often complain in this about the Jarawa, like the Sentinelese, are vulnerable to disease. The introduction of addictive substances and foreign food also risks creating a dependency on outsiders – the neighbouring Great Andamanese tribe, for example, has been reduced from 5,000 to only 41 people who survive on government rations and are plagued by alcoholism.

The localised international campaign support of the Jarawa is transformed policy on the Andaman Islands. In 2002, Indian supreme court ordered the road running through the Jarawa reserve be closed.

The authorities' own groundbreaking policy on the Jarawa now recognises their rights to live on their land in the way they choose. It acknowledges the need to protect Jarawa land from poachers, and to carefully vet officials who have contact with the tribe. Yet the road remains open, and little is being done in practice to enforce the law and to protect the Jarawa's land. Unless the authorities take immediate action to uphold the rights of the Sentinelese and the Jarawa, they will destroy both tribes' chances of an independent future, and risk allowing them to be wiped out completely.

Photo: Sentinelese people on the island a government contact mission. © 2004 Survival.