

# ECOLOGICAL MIGRATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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The Chinese government's "ecological migration" policy (known in Chinese as *shengtai yimin*) involves the forced eviction of hundreds of thousands of Mongolian herder families from their ancestral lands and relocation to agricultural and urban areas populated predominantly by Han Chinese.

## Origins of the policy

Considerable information on the origin and implementation of China's "ecological migration" policy in Southern (Inner) Mongolia<sup>1</sup> has been reported in the Chinese press, as well as through communications that the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center has relayed from on-the-ground sources.

Planning and sanctioning of this massive population displacement started in November 1998, when the State Council Document No.36 entitled "Notice Regarding Nationwide Environmental Development Plan" was issued to all levels of government at the province, autonomous region and municipal levels.

Regional level legislation started in 2001 as a series of government orders urging lower level local governments to implement the "ecological migration" project without delay. Some examples include the following regulations:

- 1) Autonomous Region Vice Chairman Hao Yidong's "Announcement on Large-scale Relocation," issued in July 2001;
- 2) The Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region's "Approval of the Development Planning Committee's Bill on Implementing the Pilot Project of Ecological Migration and Poverty Relief Relocation," passed in August 2001.

More recently, in June 2003, Inner Mongolian authorities adopted a new land use policy granting every Chinese citizen the right to "use the land first and complete the application later," encouraging individuals and groups to come to Southern Mongolia to "open up" the land. At the same time, the tra-

ditional nomadic life-style has been severely restricted; in their zeal to display loyalty to the central government, local Party committees, as well as prefecture and municipality-level authorities, have extended the policy to include a "livestock grazing ban."

Other related initiatives include "ecological development," "poverty relief relocation in Inner Mongolia" and "urbanization," and aspects of the "opening up" development project such as "highly productive intensive agricultural methods," "west-to-east energy transfer" and corporate activities relating to mining and factories.

## Justifying "ecological migration"

The ecological migration policy has three main goals:

- 1) Allowing Han Chinese from all parts of China to settle on Mongolian grasslands under the rubric of "opening up and building up the grasslands";
- 2) Displacing Mongolian herders from their lands under the rubric of "concentrating nomadic populations toward townships and cities," also known as "urbanization";
- 3) Eliminating Mongolian traditional ways of life and promoting the Han Chinese lifestyle in the name of "regulating the structure of agriculture and animal husbandry."

These three goals are not mutually exclusive, but rather collectively contribute to the assimilation and sinicization of Mongols. Statistics show that the Han Chinese population of Southern Mongolia has increased from 200,000 in 1947, with a Han-Mongol ratio of 1:5, to the present 12 million and a Han-Mongol ratio of 6:1; in short, complete absorption of the Mongol minority is within reach.<sup>2</sup>

The government of China seeks to legitimize ecological migration's negative social and political consequences on the Mongols through various means that amount to little more than sloganeering and propaganda. The main justification is that ecological migration is necessary because the grassland ecosystem has been severely damaged by Mongols' "primitive and backward" nomadic lifestyle. The authorities claim in particular that "overgrazing" by local herders is the root cause of sandstorms and desertification in the grasslands. Ironically, there seems to be no Chinese term for "over-cultivation,"

despite the unsustainable farming practices of 12 million Chinese peasants cultivating the soil of Southern Mongolia every spring. In comparison, the Mongolian herding and semi-herding population, now totaling 2.5 million people, lived in complete harmony with their environment for centuries prior to the influx of farmers.

Another popular slogan aimed at legitimizing the displacement of herders is “poverty relief.” The government has stated that at least 800,000 herders and farmers are living in extreme poverty in Inner Mongolia’s rural areas, and that these people must be removed from their lands within a few years.<sup>3</sup> However, as will be described below, this policy has actually increased poverty among the displaced, and has served to enrich only the privileged.

### Implementing the “ecological migration” policy

The Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region Development Planning Committee has reported that, starting from November 2001, 650,000 herders will be relocated from their lands within five years. Of these, 180,000 will be relocated to small towns, and 470,000 will be relocated “elsewhere.” The official Xinhua News Agency confirmed that the project was being implemented, and that as of October 2002, some 200,000 herders had already been relocated, with 20 percent of the region’s total grassland designated under a “livestock herding prohibition.”<sup>4</sup> The same source reported that livestock herding has been prohibited on 60 percent of Southern Mongolia’s arable grassland.

Following are just three examples of how the policy has been implemented:

- 1) The Xinhua News Agency in 2004 reported the establishment of China’s largest “Opening Up Zone,” occupying 5,000 square kilometers of grasslands equivalent in area to 10 Shanghais.<sup>5</sup> The zone is located in the Ulgai area of Ujumchin Left Banner,<sup>6</sup> the last piece of well-preserved top-quality wetland in Inner Mongolia. The report acknowledges that the main activities in this “Opening Up Zone” would be “cultivating grassland and growing plants,” which has brought “severe ecological destruction and no economic benefit.” It is this “opening up” initiative based on “highly productive intensive agricultural methods” that is touted by the government as superior to the “backward and primitive” nomadic lifestyle of the Mongols.
- 2) The *Beijing Evening News* reported in August 2001 that a firm named Oasis L.L.C. had initiated a massive agricultural development project in the Alshaa Right Banner of western Southern Mongolia. The project occupied 2,680 hectares of land and “blindly opened up large portions of virgin land without taking into account local natural conditions,” resulting in the creation of an additional 141 hectares of desert. The report says that this project “uses the age-old inefficient irrigation method ‘flood irrigation,’ which will permanently deplete local water resources if the 2,860 hectares of land is entirely opened up as specified in the contract.”<sup>7</sup>
- 3) The most common form of forced eviction, carried out in the name of “national projects,” has taken place throughout Southern Mongolia. A prime example is the Shuluun-

Khuhe Power Plant Project, one of the two largest projects launched as part of the central government’s “West-to-East Energy Transfer” initiative. According to reports from local herders, 3,430 households in this banner, comprising 14,691 individuals from Mongol herding families, were forcibly relocated from their lands by January 2002, and 500 hectares of grassland was permanently lost.

Groundbreaking started in July 2003, and since then the number of forcibly displaced herdsmen has increased. The local government of Shand Som (Shangdu Sumu in Chinese) relocated the entire population of Huang-Qi Gachaa (Huangqi Dui in Chinese), a village that was home to 84 Mongol herdsman households comprising 380 individuals. Houses and other structures were demolished, and even the cemetery, which the Mongols consider sacred, was dug up and removed to make way for the power plant.

The government offered “compensation” to stifle local anger, but imposed three conditions:

- 1) Each displaced household would receive a payment of 10,000 yuan (\$1,100) with the agreement that members of the household were permanently barred from returning to the land and were personally responsible for finding an alternative livelihood elsewhere;
- 2) Households declining lump-sum compensation would receive a government-built mud house valued at 5,000 yuan (\$550). However, households taking possession of a mud house were required to borrow 5,000 yuan from the government to buy an imported Australian cow;
- 3) People aged 60 or older who were heads of households were ineligible for government loans.

These examples show how economic considerations are at the heart of the government’s implementation of a policy that requires the confiscation of the grasslands from Mongol herders with little regard for appropriate compensation.

### The effect on Mongols

More serious than depriving herders of their right to occupy their ancestral lands is the fact that the government effectively bars them from ever returning. Article 6 of “Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region Shiliin-Gol League’s (Xilinguo Lemeng) Provisional Regulation on Implementing the Policies of Strategic Encirclement and Transfer” states that relocated herders will be allowed to return to their ancestral land after five years only if the following conditions are met:

- 1) They are able to manage the grassland “scientifically and rationally”;
- 2) The grassland administration authorities determine that the grassland is reusable; and
- 3) Officials at the banner, county, city and district levels approve the application.

These are conditions the Mongols can never hope to meet. First, there is no assurance that the government will change its



**Whose fault? This sandstorm in Baotou is one result of environmental degradation in the IMAR. Photo: Associated Press**

view that nomadic herding is “unscientific, irrational, primitive and crude” production. Second, the government has not defined “reusability of grassland.” Third, how could members of a politically, economically, socially and culturally marginalized group ever gain the necessary approvals from so many levels of a government that has been consistently unsympathetic to their situation?

Who, then, are the people who can “scientifically and rationally” manage the grasslands and obtain approvals from those highly bureaucratic and corrupt governments? It is of course the Han Chinese individuals and groups who have the necessary political, economic and social connections. Essentially, what is going on in Southern Mongolia is a population transfer process that settles Han Chinese immigrants on land confiscated from Mongols.

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The displacement of Mongols from their ancestral lands has not proceeded without resistance, but all protests have been harshly dealt with by the authorities, who have mobilized police, security personnel and “eviction workers” to carry out the relocation. This element of “force” or “coercion” is a clear

indicator of human rights violations.

Complaints and letters of appeal from evictees reveal that during the displacement process many herders have been arbitrarily arrested, detained and beaten, and their private property has been destroyed, demolished and confiscated by the authorities. A complaint from eastern Southern Mongolia’s Bairin Right Banner testified to the authorities’ brutal actions as follows:

On one occasion, the government used as many as 10 or so police vehicles, 20-odd police motorcycles and nearly 100 policemen and security personnel to fight with unarmed herders. Livestock have been driven away more than 30 times, 41 livestock have been plundered, four people have been beaten up and seriously injured, and two elderly herders fell unconscious after police officers intruded onto their property to plunder their livestock. Not only has the herders’ normal daily life been seriously interfered with, but they have also been arbitrarily fined 4,000 yuan. This has brought the herders serious economic and mental stress.<sup>8</sup>

The authorities’ coercive actions are well documented in the news media. Xinhua Inner Mongolia has reported on police enforcing the livestock herding prohibition.<sup>9</sup> Inner Mongolian TV reported the arrest of four herders in eastern Southern Mongolia’s Zalaid Banner for organizing villagers to resist the government’s action of leasing their grazing land to

outsiders.<sup>10</sup> A Radio Free Asia (RFA) report from February 7, 2005 described the housing conditions of the evicted herders of Shiliin-gol League:

An Uzemchin herder from the Shiliin Gol League said, on the condition of anonymity, “[O]fficials force[d] us to abandon our land for three to five years. What they offer in exchange is a tiny hut in a town suburb and a one-time payment for the land ownership rights. . . . If one wants to retain rights to the pasture, one is not given any money at all. I don’t know what to do.”

Another herder from the Shiliin Gol League echoed his account. “I saw the homes they build for resettlers. They are too small, just like a matchbox. The kitchen is the size of a cupboard. I have three children. We simply cannot fit in. . . . Even if I move in and decide to buy one milking cow, this alone will cost three times what they offer as compensation for the land.”<sup>11</sup>

South China Net reported on the inadequate housing given to evictees in the Havchil Immigrant New Village in Heshigten Banner, Chifeng Municipality. Accompanied by pictures taken from the scene, the report describes how “many houses collapsed as soon as the construction team left,” and how the rest of the houses, with foam-filled walls and straw roofs, posed “imminent danger to the evictees living there.”<sup>12</sup>

According to appeals from the Shiliin-gol League’s Shulun-huh and Huboot-shar Banners in the eastern Bairin region, local herders there were involuntarily relocated under strong resistance.<sup>13</sup>

Under the slogan of “gathering scattered herders to urban areas,” many elementary and secondary Mongolian schools have been demolished, abandoned, eliminated or relocated. Increasing numbers of parents have been forced to send their children to Han Chinese schools or to deprive their children of any kind of schooling. According to “China Labor Market,” the enrollment rate among the region’s 7,763 elementary schools decreased 19.4 percent in 2003 from the previous year.<sup>14</sup>

The human and social costs of ecological migration are staggering. The immediate consequences to herders include further impoverishment and marginalization, loss of identity, tradition and education, escalation of cultural assimilation, and emotional and psychological trauma. The sudden change of environment and lifestyle causes evicted herders to lose their sense of community and livelihood. Homesickness and insecurity regarding the future are common. Since many herders have no Chinese language and professional skills to support them in Han Chinese-dominated society; unemployment rates have increased. Coercion, inadequate compensation and a lack of social services and adequate housing are common experiences for displaced herders.

### **Economic migration and international human rights standards**

Let’s first consider the **United Nations Forced Eviction and Human Rights Fact Sheet**, which states that “forced eviction involves the involuntary removal of persons from their homes or lands,

directly or indirectly attributable to the state.”<sup>15</sup> Communications and reports from both evictees and evictors confirm that the Chinese government’s ecological migration policy in Southern Mongolia leads to the forcible removal of herders from their lands.

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According to the **UN Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000**,<sup>16</sup> “. . . all citizens of all states, poor as they may be, have a right to expect their governments to be concerned about shelter needs, and to accept a fundamental obligation to protect and improve houses and neighborhoods, rather than damage or destroy them.” Lacking any dialogue with those affected, this unilateral project is in clear violation of this basic obligation of the state, and has brought further impoverishment to the evictees.

According to the **Report of the Inner Mongolian Academy of Social Sciences Pastoral Area Economic Research Department**,<sup>17</sup> immediately following implementation of ecological migration, the average income of 111 evicted herder households in Sunid Right Banner’s Chihiragt Immigration Village plunged from 2,872 yuan in 2000 (before relocation) to 848 yuan in 2001 (after relocation), and by 2002 it had decreased further to only 503 yuan. During the same period, the average household debt increased from no debt at all to 7,000-8,000 yuan. These statistics show a failure to adhere to UN guidelines for compensation and resettlement of forced eviction, which state that “at minimum, they [the evictees] should be no worse off than before relocation.”<sup>18</sup>

**Resolution 1995/29 of the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities** states, “The practice of forced eviction constitutes a gross violation of human rights, in particular the right to adequate housing, the right to remain, the right to freedom of movement, the right to privacy, the right to security of the home, the right to security of tenure . . . and a variety of additional rights.” The Chinese government claims it has fulfilled its “resettlement” duties to evacuees by simply tossing herders into Immigrant New Villages and suburban agricultural areas without follow-up plans for adequate housing and other social and medical services. Reports show that many herders have been resettled in small mud huts and abandoned houses lacking adequate heat, water and electricity. This is in clear violation of the UN sub-commission resolution.

According to **Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**,<sup>19</sup> to which China is a signatory,<sup>20</sup> “In those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right in community with the other members of their groups,

to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion or to use their own language." These rights must not be violated under any circumstance by any states, especially states such as China that have signed the convention.

The Chinese government, however, has employed the slogan of "altering the mode of production in grasslands" to negate the value of the traditional nomadic lifestyle and promote assimilation. Numerous articles and reports blame the lifestyle and culture of nomadic herders for destroying the grassland and causing sandstorms, while praising "model herders" who have "modernized their thinking" and "finally said goodbye to the Mongol yurt."<sup>21</sup> This propaganda has become the ideological mantra of an ecological migration policy aimed at achieving cultural assimilation in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## Conclusion

The ecological migration policy in its various forms, including "ecological construction," "poverty relief," "encircling and transforming," "arranging the structure of animal husbandry and agriculture" and "west-to-east energy transfer" is in fact a political tactic designed to assimilate Mongols into the greater Han population. Involving large-scale forced evictions implemented directly by the state, the policy has resulted in gross violations of the human rights of Mongols and has created a social, economic, cultural, physical and psychological crisis that threatens the very survival of Mongols as a people in the region. This painful, disruptive and involuntary process not only goes against the will of the local Mongols, but also, in its destruction of existing ecosystems and eradication of an environmentally friendly way of life, goes against nature as well.

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## NOTES

1. Mongolian residents of Inner Mongolia prefer the term Southern Mongolia (Uvur Mongol), because they see "Inner Mongolia" as an ideological term that helps legitimize China's political occupation and territorial inclusion of Southern Mongolia.
2. According to China's National Bureau of Statistics' data from the 2000 census, 79.17 percent of Inner Mongolia's population is made up of Han Chinese, with 17.13 percent Mongol and the remainder a smattering of other ethnic groups. The official China Internet Information Center (CIIC) states that Inner Mongolia's total population of 23.77 million consists of 3.97 million Mongols, 18.75 million Han Chinese, and 900,010 members of other ethnic groups. CIIC (no date), <http://china.org.cn/english/features/45688.htm>.
3. See Development Reform Commission of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, "Overview of Implementing Poverty Relief Relocation in Inner Mongolia" (Nei Menggu shishi yidi kaifa fupin yimin qingkuang de jianjie), November 30, 2001, <http://www.nmgfgw.gov.cn/html/2004-8-20/2004820150951.htm>. The official CIIC states, "By the end of 2000, Inner Mongolia still had some 804,000 poverty-stricken people without necessary food and clothes and 3 million in unstable sit-

uation. It needs to resettle 200,000 people," CIIC (no date), <http://china.org.cn/english/features/45690.htm>.

4. "Guanyu xibu shengtai yimin: Shentai yimin ya ying 'zhu shuicao er ju," Xinhua News Agency, October 29, 2002, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2002-10/29/content\\_611967.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2002-10/29/content_611967.htm).
5. "Quanguo zui da kaifuqu' de jiaoxun bu ke qingshi (The lessons of the "biggest development region" cannot be overlooked)," Xinhua News Agency, December 22, 2004, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/comments/2004-12/22/content\\_2362706.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/comments/2004-12/22/content_2362706.htm).
6. A banner is a county-level administrative division in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. There are 49 banners in Inner Mongolia. China's Qing Dynasty rulers first organized the Mongols into banners, with each banner having subdivisions called "sumun," or "arrows." Several banners combined make up a "league."
7. "Yema kaifa tudi shafa, Beijing fengsha yuantou shengtai zao pohuai" (Wilderness development brings desertification, Beijing environment spoiled by sandstorms), China Internet Information Center, August 19, 2004, <http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/huanjing/639909.htm>. An English translation of the article is provided on the Web site of the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center, [http://www.smhric.org/news\\_45.htm](http://www.smhric.org/news_45.htm).
8. See "A Complaint By Bayan-Khan Township's Zuun Khar Mod Gachaa and Khoroochin Gachaa's Herders in Bagarin Rights Banner," [http://www.smhric.org/Hada/Evict\\_21.htm](http://www.smhric.org/Hada/Evict_21.htm).
9. "Forest Police Ensure Encirclement and Sealing off of Grasslands and Prohibiting of Herding," Xinhua News Agency, June 13, 2002.
10. "How Grassland Turn to Desert," Inner Mongolian TV, July 24, 2004.
11. Gardi Borjigin, "Inner Mongolian Environment Threatened, Nomads Forced to Move," Radio Free Asia, February 7, 2005, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/social/2005/02/07/nomads/>.
12. "Project of Immigration or Project of Fooling People?," South China Net, July 1, 2004, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/house/2004-06/21/content\\_1537002.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/house/2004-06/21/content_1537002.htm).
13. See "A Complaint By Bayan-Khan Township's Zuun Khar Mod Gachaa and Khoroochin Gachaa's Herders in Bagarin Rights Banner," [http://www.smhric.org/Hada/Evict\\_21.htm](http://www.smhric.org/Hada/Evict_21.htm); and "Power Plant Project Forces Local Mongols to Abandon Ancestral Lands," [http://www.smhric.org/news\\_30.htm](http://www.smhric.org/news_30.htm).
14. Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Bureau of Statistics, "China Labor Market," May 21, 2004, <http://210.72.32.6/cgi-bin/bigate.cgi/b/g/g/http@210.72.32.26/was40/reldetail.jsp?docid=402132755>.
15. United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Fact Sheet No. 25, "Forced Eviction and Human Rights," <http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu6/2/fs25.htm>.
16. UN General Assembly, *Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000*, passed on June 6, 1988, [http://hq.unhabitat.org/programmes/housingpolicy/gss\\_monitoring.asp](http://hq.unhabitat.org/programmes/housingpolicy/gss_monitoring.asp).
17. Nei Menggu Shehui Kexuiyuan muqu jingji yanjiusuo baogao, August 2003.
18. United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Fact Sheet No. 25, op. cit.
19. United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, entered into force March 23, 1976, [http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/a\\_ccpr.htm](http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ccpr.htm).
20. Although it has yet to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the PRC is, as a signatory, obligated to not defeat the object and purpose of the treaty.
21. See, for example, "Caoyuan shang qiaoran 'fugui' Mengubao" (On the grasslands, a quiet "reversion" to Mongols), China Internet Information Center, December 8, 2000, <http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2000/Dec13318.htm>.