

# Indigenous Peoples Call for Global Ban on Uranium Mining

By Brenda Norrell | February 6, 2007

Indigenous peoples from around the world, victims of uranium mining, nuclear testing, and nuclear dumping, issued a global ban on uranium mining on native lands.

The declaration, signed during the Indigenous World Uranium Summit, held Nov. 30-Dec. 2, 2006 on the Navajo Nation in Window Rock, Arizona, brought together Australian aboriginals and villagers from India and Africa. Pacific islanders joined with indigenous peoples from the Americas to take action and halt the cancer, birth defects, and death from uranium and nuclear industries on native lands.

Villagers from India testified to the alarming number of babies who die before they are born or are born with serious birth defects, and of the high rates of cancer that are claiming the lives of those who live near the uranium mines.

Australia Aboriginal Rebecca Bear-Wingfield, stolen as an infant and now an activist, told of the death threats for those who oppose the expansion of uranium mining in South Australia. Corporations have attempted to buy Aboriginals' approval for new uranium mining projects on native lands.

From northern China came the voice of Sun Xiaodi, a whistleblower who has exposed massive unregulated uranium contamination. Xiaodi is now under house arrest in Gansu Province after he was "disappeared" and imprisoned in 2004-2005.

Xiaodi, along with five other anti-nuclear activists, was awarded the Nuclear-Free Future Award in 2006. The awards highlighted not only the personal and collective achievements of the recipients but also the international collaboration that has grown within the movement. Those honored came from several continents.

## Organizing International Resistance to Uranium Mining: From Salzburg to Window Rock

The Navajo Nation provides a fitting backdrop for discussions of the dangers of uranium mining. The history of uranium mining on these native lands goes back decades to when Navajo workers were sent to their deaths in Cold War uranium mines, unknowingly aiding the production of the world's first weapons of mass destruction.

Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley Jr. remarked, "As a result, radiation exposure has cost the Navajo Nation the accumulated wisdom, knowledge, stories, songs, and ceremonies—to say nothing of the lives—of hundreds of our people. Now, aged Navajo uranium miners and their families continue to fight the Cold War in their doctors' offices as they try to understand how the invisible killer of radiation exposure left them with many forms of cancer and other illnesses decades after leaving the uranium mines."

The tragedy spurred a growing resistance to the mines, and the Navajo Nation today is at the head of an international movement. In one of the movement's greatest achievements, in 2005 the tribe passed the Dineh Natural Resources Protection Act banning uranium mining on Navajo lands. Norman Brown, a Navajo and member of the organization Dineh Bidzill Coalition that co-organized the Summit, said, "The heart of this movement is here—we are at the center of this movement today."

Like Navajos, Pueblos were also victims of the Cold War. As the truth emerged, Navajo and Pueblos in nearby New Mexico at first believed they were the lone victims of this death march. Uranium mining



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was enveloped in secrecy and carried out surreptitiously under the guise of national security, shielding it from public scrutiny and isolating its victims.

### Major Challenges

*For years uranium mining was shrouded in secrecy as part of the Cold War and its victims were isolated.*

*Compensation has been hard to win in the courts and although recognized in the 1990 Radiation Exposure Compensation Act for Navajo Uranium Miners, only a small percentage of mining families have received their due.*

*A general lack of political power in indigenous communities makes them easy marks for dangerous uranium mining and dumping projects.*

*The rising price of uranium has caused renewed pressure on indigenous lands.*

But as they became more vocal in their demands, the peoples of the U.S. Southwest soon met indigenous peoples from other parts of the world who shared similar histories as victims of uranium mining, nuclear testing, and nuclear waste dumps. Indignation grew as they realized that American Indian uranium miners in both the United States and Canada had been sent to their deaths to work in the uranium mines long after scientists warned of the health hazards of radon gas and radiation.

The first international meeting to exchange experiences and begin to develop demands took place at the World Uranium Hearing in Salzburg, Austria, in 1992, where activists began their struggle to halt uranium mining on indigenous land. In the words of the organizers, the Navajo meeting was held to follow up on that experience, develop coordinated actions and issue an international and energetic call for a halt to uranium mining on native lands throughout the world.

More than 300 participants from 14 countries participated in the event, with speeches covering all aspects of uranium mining, international activists efforts to halt the mining, and the devastating health effects.

Their message to the world: "Leave the uranium in the ground."

## Global Threats to Local Life: Defending Communities

At the Navajo summit, Manuel Pino, Acoma Pueblo from New Mexico and college professor, recalled that in Salzburg, Dene from Canada described the cancer that resulted from working in uranium mines without protective clothing. Mining in Canada and the United States was often carried out by the same corporations.

"As we went to Salzburg, we realized that many of our people were sick and dying," Pino said. He pointed out that Laguna Pueblo's Paguate village is only 2,000 feet from the largest open-pit uranium mine in North America, the Jackpile Mine. Pino said radioactive particles have been found in the animals, water, air, and in the bodies of people of the Pueblos.

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### Laguna Pueblo's Paguate village is only 2,000 feet from the largest open-pit uranium mine in North America

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Residents of the Laguna Pueblo waged a pitched battle for reclamation of the Jackpile Mine. Originally owned by Anaconda, and now owned by Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) the lease owners simply walked away when mining stopped, leaving radioactive waste strewn and the earth torn apart. Ultimately, reclamation efforts began, but it was too late for the many Pueblos dying or already dead from cancer.

Pino noted that Acoma Pueblo members live downwind and downstream from the Grants, New Mexico, mineral belt—a 60-mile stretch where uranium was produced from 1948 through the 1990s. He claimed that most of the uranium mined on Indian lands by the United States Department of Defense was used in the production of weapons of mass destruction.

According to Pino, recent efforts endorsed by the United States and other nations to stall passage of

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the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the United Nations stem from material interests. He stated that indigenous peoples have vast mineral resources beneath the surface of their lands, along with timber, water and other natural resources, and these nations view the exercise of indigenous rights as a threat to corporate access to and exploitation of this natural wealth.

“Our permanent sovereignty over our resources is a threat to the nation states of the world,” Pino told the uranium summit.

He added that here on the Navajo Nation in the past the tribe has entered into leases that favor the corporations, often without being duly informed of the risks. In the Pueblos, he said, the people were never told of the harm that would result from the radioactive dust settling on their traditional drying fruit and drying meat.

Nation states, he said, do not realize that Indigenous Peoples take their responsibility as caretakers of Mother Earth seriously and will not back down. Recalling the words of Sitting Bull, Pino urged the people to “come together to form a fist to protect Mother Earth.”

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Carletta Tilousi, Havasupai from the Grand Canyon in Arizona, attended both uranium summits, in Salzburg and Window Rock. Tilousi praised Havasupai tribal leaders for passing a ban on uranium mining in Havasupai territory in the Grand Canyon and placing the ban in the Havasupai Tribal Constitution.

Still, with the rising price of uranium and new threats to Indian lands, Tilousi said tribes must be vigilant to support one another in the protection of Mother Earth.

## **Ground Gained and Battles Pending**

Tilousi said the Havasupai like many other indigenous peoples felt very alone in their struggle until they went to Salzburg in 1992. There they met indigenous people from all over the world that are fighting mining corporations. On the Navajo Nation, Africans told of fighting gold mining corporations and indigenous peoples from the Pacific testified about nuclear testing that left behind radioactive fish.

“Those are the things that affect me very deeply,” said Tilousi, who remembered her Havasupai elders and her Hopi relatives who have spent their lives struggling for indigenous rights and protection of Mother Earth.

Tilousi, who serves as a Havasupai tribal council delegate, said she admired the strength of the Navajos and others gathered at the conference. Recalling words that have long been repeated to her, she said, “Always keep Mother Earth in mind, always keep your spirit strong.”

Esther Yazzie-Lewis, Navajo, recalled her first trip to New York, when she was a young woman, decades ago, to speak out against uranium mining. She testified to how the uranium mined in Monument Valley, Arizona, on the Navajo Nation, was used to make the atomic bomb that killed Japanese in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. She remembered how the Japanese respected her for what she said that day and how good it felt to speak out.

Yazzie-Lewis recalled protesting in the cold on Navajo land, following the nation’s largest uranium mill spill, in Church Rock, N.M. in 1979. At that time, not only were surrounding communities contaminated but in the years that followed Navajos living downstream at New Lands also became victims of radiation from the Church Rock spill. Ironically, they were living there after being relocated there from Black Mesa due to Peabody Coal’s mining operations.

According to Yazzie-Lewis, the movement to oppose uranium mining employed many strategies and tactics. In addition to the direct action of protests at the mine, the opposition began to lobby local

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government. She cited in particular the late Harris Arthur, Navajo, and his work with the Navajo tribal government. Arthur's early efforts ultimately led to the Navajo Nation Council's passage of the Dineh Natural Resources Protection Act, the support of Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr. and the Navajo Nation's ban on uranium mining

Yazzie-Lewis said her goal for the 2006 uranium summit was to create a global solidarity network. She encouraged indigenous peoples not to be fooled by the gifts of energy corporations, and to think of future generations.

"Let's protect what we have for our youths, so they will have the identity to be Navajos."

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**[D]espite the Navajo Nation ban on uranium mining, corporations are planning new uranium mining in an area that would contaminate Navajos' drinking water.**

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Mitchell Capitan, cofounder of Eastern Navajo Dineh against Uranium Mining, described the first efforts in eastern Navajo land in 1994. Capitan said his wife Rita was the main founder of the organization and promoted efforts to fight uranium mining at Crownpoint and Church Rock, N.M.

At the time, Capitan worked for Mobile Oil at an in-situ leach uranium mining demonstration project, six miles west of Crownpoint.

"It made me think that so much water was used, so much water was wasted and so much water was contaminated." After uranium prices plunged the project was shut down.

Mitchell, a lab technician for the project, said for three years Mobil attempted but could not restore the water to its original quality at the leach mining project site.

## Achievements

- *Local activism led to the Compensation Act.*
- *The Navajo and Havasupai Nations have banned uranium mining on native lands.*
- *Collaboration between local groups of indigenous peoples, tribal governments, foundations, and non-governmental organizations has led to mining bans, mine closures.*

When there was renewed interest in mining in 1994, Navajos in Crownpoint took action. They discovered that secret negotiations were underway by corporations with landowners of non-tribal trust lands in this checkerboard land area. These were being carried out, without any public hearings. Navajos who were fighting to protect the water and air began to meet, with the first gathering attracting 40 community members.

"Ever since then, we began to roll," Capitan said, adding that Southwest Research and Information Center, based in Albuquerque, gave technical expertise.

Now, despite the Navajo Nation ban on uranium mining, corporations are planning new uranium mining in an area that would contaminate Navajos' drinking water in the Crownpoint and Church Rock areas, since the land is considered "checkerboard," with allotted lands and other non-trust lands intermixed with tribal trust lands.

But Capitan said Navajos now have evidence to refute corporate claims that in-situ uranium mining is safe and the water will not be harmed. They are fighting to protect the pristine aquifer water, which feeds two municipal deep wells providing water for 15,000 people.

"This is what we're trying to protect, our water. I hope we are not the guinea pigs of this in-situ leach mining. If they ever start mining in Crownpoint, the contamination of our water will take about seven years."

Capitan pointed out the strategy of corporations. In Crownpoint, the average income is \$12,000 a year and the population is 97% Native American.

"The company is really using us. Sure, they say there will be plenty of jobs, but it doesn't take much manpower." He said in reality, the jobs would

go to highly paid scientists, not local laborers. The people will be left with contaminated water.

“This kind of mining takes a lot of water, it would take our water,” he said. Crownpoint people are working in a united effort to prevent uranium mining in nearby Church Rock because if the companies restart mining there the rest of the region will be threatened. “It will be a domino effect.”

Capitan said that 12 years ago, when they began, he and his wife felt alone in the struggle and had little idea of where to look for help. Little by little, they became connected to an international movement that gave them greater leverage in the local battle.

“Word went out to the world; finally our Navajo Nation government listened.”

Jamie Kneen of Minewatch Canada described the uranium mining and its effects on First Nations people in Canada. In Northern Ontario, mining and resulting contamination went on from the 1950s through 1990s. The Serpent River watershed water is now highly contaminated, which affects the Anishinaabe people. In Northern Saskatchewan the history is similar.

“In the 40s and 50s, the tailings were just dumped into lakes and rivers,” Kneen recounted. Later, after tailing dams were in place, contaminated runoff became a hazard.

Kneen reported that Canadian indigenous peoples have centered efforts on the processes for permits, consultation, and consent. In the regions of Canada where populations are primarily non-aboriginal and there is greater political influence with the government, communities have been able to halt the operations with bans on uranium mining. Public education and capacity-building in indigenous communities could increase their ability to do the same.

Another problem is getting industry to respond to the concerns of indigenous peoples. So far, Kneen stated, although Dene people have tried to slow the expansion of uranium mining in Canada, it has done little good. Public hearings have mostly failed to halt uranium mining.

“The industry simply goes ahead and does what it wants,” Kneen said.

In Canada, he explained, the hard rock is full of cracks that contain water. Since water travels, the question is how water washed out of from mining areas will seep into the system and affect the fish, wildlife and people.



Nuclear Free Future Award recipients and presenters: Standing, from left to right: Phil Harrison, Gordon Edwards, Paul Robinson, Willem Malten, Manny Pino, Heike Hoedt, Feng Congde, Esther Yazzie-Lewis, Chris Shuey, Ed Grothus, Claus Biegert, Jill Momaday-Gray. Kneeling and sitting in front, from left to right: Wolfgang Scheffler, Robert Del Tredici, Sofia Martinez.

Carrie Dann a Western Shoshone from Crescent Valley, Nev., told how Shoshone territory has been blighted by nuclear testing and is now targeted as a nuclear dump site at Yucca Mountain, which is under construction. Striving to protect their aboriginal lands granted by the Treaty of Ruby Valley of 1863, Western Shoshone are protesting nuclear testing. Now, gold mining corporations are hollowing out the mountains in Western Shoshone sacred land near Elko, Nev., in the area of Western Shoshone’s sacred Mount Tenabo. The gold mining corporations began operations after the Dann’s family horses were seized. Currently, there is a resistance effort to halt the gold mining to protect the land and water.

## Awards Honor Leaders

The Nuclear Free Future Awards were presented in cooperation with the Seventh Generation Fund and the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, based in Germany. The Franz Moll Foundation for the Coming Generations presented the awards.

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Claus Biegert of Germany, among the organizers of the event, said it was the tragedy of Chernobyl that triggered the uranium summits. After the catastrophe of Chernobyl, Biegert asked himself “What about the Navajo uranium miners who were dying and never made the news?” The world-famous disaster in Russia ended up revealing the silent deaths in Navajo land and other places. The common thread between the victims was a single mineral—uranium.

Biegert discovered that around the world, the largest number of victims of uranium mining, nuclear testing and nuclear waste dumping were indigenous peoples. This fact was first brought to his attention by a high school graduate readying for Harvard that he met in a cafeteria of the United Nations in Geneva in 1977. Her name was Winona LaDuke.

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**Tibetan workers report that an assortment of radioactivity-related cancers and immune system diseases account for nearly half of the deaths in the region.**

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With a felt-tip pen, LaDuke had pointed out the uranium mining in the Southwest United States. She told Biegert if he was going to be involved, he should go to the Southwest, where she too would soon visit.

From those first efforts, the Nuclear Free Future Awards were born to recognize those fighting for justice around the world.

“We have to let the world know that uranium should stay in the ground,” Biegert said to summit participants.

The Nuclear Free Future Awards for 2006 were presented at the Navajo Summit. In addition to the award to Xiaodi other recipients included Gordon Edwards of Canada for educational activism, Wolfgang Scheffler and Heike Hoedt of Germany for

global solutions with innovative green energy reflectors, and Ed Grothus of Los Alamos, N.M., for lifetime achievement for creative exposure of the nuclear industry.

There were two special recognition awards presented. Phil Harrison, Navajo, was honored for his struggle for justice and compensation by way of the 1990 Radiation Exposure Compensation Act for Navajo uranium miners. The Southwest Research and Information Center in Albuquerque was honored for the staff’s relentless struggle for environmental justice.

Bringing Xiaodi’s message to the summit was Chinese activist Feng Congde of Human Rights China in New York, who fled China after the massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Xiaodi formerly worked in Project 792, referring to Uranium Mine No. 792—one of the highest yielding uranium mines in China. Opened in 1967, Project 792 was run by the military and annually milled 140-180 tons of uranium-bearing rock until it was officially shut down in 2002 as bankrupt owing to “ore exhaustion and obsolete equipment.”

However, a private mine secretly rose from its radioactive ashes, operated by Longjiang Nuclear, Ltd. Its shareholders include a tight brotherhood of politicians and members of the nuclear ministry.

“Just a couple of days ago, under the cover of night while the local Tibetans were all asleep, the mine as usual dumped untreated irradiated water straight into the Bailong River, a tributary of the Yangtze,” said Xiaodi’s written statement. “At present, in our region there are an unusually high number of miscarriages and birth defects, with many children born blind or malformed.”

He continued, “Today, large sweeps of Ansu Province—dotted with sacred sites—appear to have succumbed to an overdose of chemotherapy. The Chinese have taken no preventive measures to protect local human and animal life from uranium contamination,” according to the award statement.

Tibetan workers report that an assortment of radioactivity-related cancers and immune system diseases account for nearly half of the deaths in the region. This remains among the “state secrets” and

the patients' medical histories are manipulated to protect state secrecy.

Xiaodi asked that his \$10,000 award be held for him, in hopes that he can someday be free to receive the award. His statement read, "Since my release from detention, I have been in an extremely insecure situation in which I am threatened, intimidated, and harassed. I felt tremendously honored and touched when I learned that I had been selected as this year's Nuclear Free Future Award recipient, because I have seen the great power of world peace and development.

"At the same time, I feel a deep sorrow, because I have also helplessly witnessed the environmental problems caused by the failure to effectively contain and reduce nuclear contamination.

"Breaking through fear to fight for a nuclear-free environment requires a person to take a path full of hardship, bloodshed, and tears, which could end up in either life or death. However, I firmly believe that if all people who are peace-loving and concerned with human destiny and upholding justice can come together and take action as soon as possible, a nuclear-free tomorrow can become a reality."

On April 28, 2005 Xiaodi met with foreign journalists and told them about the frequent discharges of radioactive waste into Gansu waterways. He also told them about the Tibetan hitchhikers who climb up on trucks transporting uranium ore, happy for a ride. He also exposed that contaminated machinery was merely "hosed down" and sold to naïve buyers in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Zhejiang, Human, and Hubei.

"These officials have blood on their hands," Xiaodi said.

The next day, plains clothes officers "disappeared" him. He was not heard from for months. Finally, mounting international pressure forced his release from Lanzhou Prison on Dec. 27, 2005.

Xiaodi continued to speak out against Project 792.

"They simply changed a military enterprise into a civilian enterprise and continued with large-scale mining." On April 4, Xiaodi visited fellow petitioner Yue Yongjim in prison. Xiaodi found Yongjim

## DECLARATION OF THE INDIGENOUS WORLD URANIUM SUMMIT

**Window Rock, Navajo Nation, USA  
December 2, 2006**

*We, the Peoples gathered at the Indigenous World Uranium Summit, at this critical time of intensifying nuclear threats to Mother Earth and all life, demand a worldwide ban on uranium mining, processing, enrichment, fuel use, and weapons testing and deployment, and nuclear waste dumping on native lands.*

*Past, present and future generations of indigenous peoples have been disproportionately affected by the international nuclear weapons and power industry. The nuclear fuel chain poisons our people, land, air, and waters and threatens our very existence and our future generations. Nuclear power is not a solution to global warming. Uranium mining, nuclear energy development, and international agreements (e.g., the recent U.S.-India nuclear cooperation treaty) that foster the nuclear fuel chain violate our basic human rights and fundamental natural laws of Mother Earth, endangering our traditional cultures and spiritual well-being.*

*We reaffirm the Declaration of the World Uranium Hearing in Salzburg, Austria, in 1992, that "uranium and other radioactive minerals must remain in their natural location." Further, we stand in solidarity with the Navajo Nation for enacting the Diné Natural Resources Protection Act of 2005, which bans uranium mining and processing and is based on the Fundamental Laws of the Diné. And we dedicate ourselves to a nuclear-free future.*

*Indigenous peoples are connected spiritually and culturally to our Mother, the Earth. Accordingly, we endorse and encourage development of renewable energy sources that sustain—not destroy—indigenous lands and the Earth's ecosystems.*

*In tribute to our ancestors, we continue centuries of resistance against colonialism. We recognize the work, courage, dedication, and sacrifice of those individuals from Indigenous Nations and from Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, India, Japan, the United States, and Vanuatu, who participated in the Summit. We further recognize the invaluable work of those who were honored at the Nuclear-Free Future Awards ceremony on December 1, 2006. And we will continue to support activists worldwide in their nonviolent efforts to stop uranium development.*

*We are determined to share the knowledge we have gained at this Summit with the world. In the weeks and months ahead, we will summarize and disseminate the testimonies, traditional indigenous knowledge, and medical and scientific evidence that justify a worldwide ban on uranium development. We will enunciate specific plans of action at the tribal, local, national, and international levels to support Native resistance to the nuclear fuel chain. And we will pursue legal and political redress for all past, current, and future impacts of the nuclear fuel chain on indigenous peoples and their resources.*

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emaciated from forced labor on a food allowance of only three steamed flour buns a day. Xiaodi joined a protest demanding Yongjim's release. Xiaodi was again "disappeared," and is now under house arrest.

Grassroots organizers passed a declaration from the summit calling for a global ban on uranium mining on native lands. Further, indigenous vowed to take any action necessary, including direct action and court action, to halt uranium mining, nuclear testing and nuclear dumping on indigenous lands.

Indigenous peoples also set goals to contact stockholders of corporations violating the rights of indigenous peoples; increase media campaigns; educate fellow indigenous peoples on the issues; and to document abuses to the land and people.

The summit concluded on a lighter note, with some of the most popular American Indian musicians performing in concert, including Gary Farmer and Keith Secola. Farmer began with a tribute to his fellow Six Nations people for taking a stand in Caledonia, Canada, to protect their land rights. Secola honored the heroes of this movement with a round dance and tribute.

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## RESOURCES:

Eastern Navajo Diné against Uranium Mining  
<http://www.endaum.org/>

Southwest Research and Information Center  
<http://www.sric.org/>

Nuclear Free Future Awards  
[www.nuclear-free.com/english/frames7.htm](http://www.nuclear-free.com/english/frames7.htm)

Seventh Generation Fund  
<http://www.7genfund.org/>

International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War  
<http://www.ippnw.org/>

Declaration of the Indigenous World Uranium Summit  
<http://www.unobserver.com/index.php?pagina=layout5.php&id=2901&blz=1>

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