

# Television in America— a Distinct Symbol "57 Channels and Nothing on..."

Wasim Choudhury writes from New York

CNN in Bangladesh. That news was received with some awe by Bangladeshis living in the United States. Ironically, it would seem, that viewers back home were watching something that many here were not. At first glance, it might sound rather contradictory. After all, CNN is American, so why shouldn't Bangladeshis living in America be able to watch CNN? The breakdown of the acronym CNN might shed light on that perplexing notion; Cable News Network is only available through cable television and many in the States don't have cable television. No need to sympathize, though. Viewers in America who don't have cable television, have an ample range of selection of cable-free channels to choose from. Sympathy, however, may be needed while surveying the quality of programmes that are on most American channels, cable or otherwise.

Broadcasting, especially television broadcasting, is big business in America. While print media is deploring the ever decreasing size of readership and radio is feeling the effects of fewer listeners, television is solidifying its hold as the best medium of advertisement for companies throughout this country. Most channels in the States are privately owned, operated primarily through the revenue earned from advertisements. A few are financed by

government endowments, and some cable channels are dependent on subscription fees. There is no television licensing fee in the United States.

American air waves, cable-free ones at least, are dominated by networks. There are four privately-owned primary networks in the country, namely American Broadcasting Corp (ABC), Columbia Broadcasting Service (CBS), National Broadcasting Corp (NBC), and Fox Television Network. There is also a publicly funded network, appropriately called Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). Telemundo, another privately-owned network, offers programme solely in Spanish language. These organizations themselves do not broadcast directly to the public but provide a substantial portion of programming, including national news, sports, situation comedies and dramas, to their affiliates and subsidiary stations. These stations, in turn, broadcast these programme to their local areas. Network programme are usually broadcast simultaneously by all of the network's affiliate stations.

Networks usually pay studios to produce shows that they deem would captivate audiences throughout the country. Extensive marketing research is done before a programme is presented to the audience. Every programme has a target audience, and advertisers may choose to place their advertise-

ments based on the findings of these research studies and ratings for these programmes. Networks compete for ratings, as compiled by the AC Nielsen Company; the higher the number of people watching a show denotes a higher rating point for that show. Although most top-rated shows are controlled by the networks, some shows do well without the networks. Studios that produce these programmes sell them directly to stations across the country, by-passing the networks entirely. Ratings for these programmes rival those of the best network counterparts. However, these shows are few, and networks still hold the most influential position in television programming.

Cable television is somewhat different in structure. The obvious difference is that, unlike regular television channels, cable is not transmitted wireless. In order to receive cable channels, one has to pay a cable operator to provide cable wiring and a 'descrambler' box to his/her television. The 'descrambler' box allows cable companies to regulate reception

of only those channels that the customer has ordered. Almost every home in the United States is accessible by cable television. Cable wires spurn out of the operator's stations in each locality and emanate to households that order the service. Each month, the individual is charged a fee for receiving cable channels. This toll, however, does not absolve the need for commercials — television advertisements, as they are known in the US; most cable channels do show commercials as often as cable-free channels.

A second group of channels, known as the premiere channels (perhaps because of their extravagant price), are commercial-free but cost more to view. Better known among these channels are Home Box Office (HBO), Showtime, Sports Channel, The Disney Channel and Cinemax. These channels specialize in broadcasting only specialized types of programming around the clock. HBO and Showtime are known for movies and special event programmes (like heavy-weight boxing matches), Cinemax is

exclusively movies, Sports Channel is for sports (no kidding), and Disney is for kid's programmes.

Yet another group of channels are the pay-per-view channels. Pay-per-view allows audience to get the benefits of premiere channels (no commercials, thank you) for individual programmes only. Clients can phone in their cable operators and request to see a movie that is running on one of these channels at a specific time. This way, the viewer is practically able to choose the time he/she would like to see this movie. Pay-per-view also shows speciality events, like live concerts and sports, notably the FA Cup Soccer Championship match, and World Cup Cricket.

Cable television, because of the virtually limited less capacity of fiber optic cables, obviously provides more channels than regular television. Most cable systems offer at least a dozen channels, some double that number. Along with regular television and premiere channels, an average household in America might be able to receive as many as a hundred chan-

nels. This expanded capacity has allowed specialty channels to pop up in the spectrum of the remote-control. CNN is an all-news channel. The Weather Channel provides continuous updates on the changes in climatic environment of regions within and outside the United States. C-Span dedicates its entire broadcast on coverage of Congress, from live Senate debates to taped confirmation hearings. CNBC is a consumer information channel. Court TV is full of trials and legal proceedings from courts around the nation. The Sci-fi channel broadcasts only movies and drama series dealing with the future world. Comedy Central is a channel that transmits stand-up comedy routines, situation comedies and anything else that is considered funny. MTV and VH-1 are channels that dedicate most of their programming to the world music — mainly music videos. Finally, there are home-shopping channels that give the viewer and avenue to purchase major items without ever having to step out of his/her home. The process is simple: retailers display their

merchandise on TV along with a phone number. Should the potential buyer like the item, he or she dials that phone number and charges the amount on a credit card. Within a week, the item is delivered to the purchaser's door step. These channels, note sociologists, are changing the behaviour of shoppers around the country. Scholars claim that these channels are the forerunners of the future form of the cathode tube: an interactive one.

Despite the choices presented through television, there still seems to be a disgruntled note coming out of American TV audiences. Bruce Springsteen, a music superstar gripes in one of his songs titled "57 Channels and Nothing on..." He is not the only one. Many Americans complain that there is nothing worthwhile to watch on television. Critics point out that American television programming has become very violent, and lately, very lurid with sexual scenes in almost every programme on the air. Educational documentaries, they claim, have taken a back-seat to bloody and torrid shows that demean the quality of programmes. Most situation comedies, some assert, offer nothing more than slap-stick humour. Some observers say that most dramas, especially those called soap-operas that go on the air daily, are clichéd in format and stereotypical in nature. Yet others frown that

'talk-shows' — magazine programme involving questions and answer sessions from the guests, live audience and the moderator — only, offer sensationalism with topics such as "Housewives Making Money from Erotic Vacation" or "Abusive Dates" or "People Reunite with Childhood Bullies". Finally, many stations simply re-broadcast hit shows in a process called "re-runs". Although once enlightening, the re-broadcast obviously lacks the novelty of the programme therefore dulls the imagination and creativity of the viewer significantly.

Despite the fact that many programmes are of poor quality, it must be noted that there are some highly acclaimed shows on TV as well. Public Broadcasting Service still airs some very enlightening programmes that come in documentary format. Some dramas shown on network television have been critically hailed for portraying matters of general concern in an unbiased yet compelling manner. Many news programmes, including those made by CNN, have received rave reviews for being thorough in investigative reporting and candid in critical analysis. These programmes ensure that television shows continue to be a major export overseas for this country. Television in America, it must be noted, is not just entertainment, but is a distinct symbol of this nation.

## Lonely People of the Atolls Resist Change

TOKELAU, a group of three atolls in the South Pacific which are now more than four metres above sea level, are under pressure from Pacific island countries to end their colonial status by the year 2000. They are administered by New Zealand.

The 1,690 inhabitants of the islands want to stay as they are. The Official Secretary, as the head of the Public Service for the islands is called, has responded: "The people do not wish to move away from New Zealand now or in the immediate future. New Zealand will continue to respect that wish."

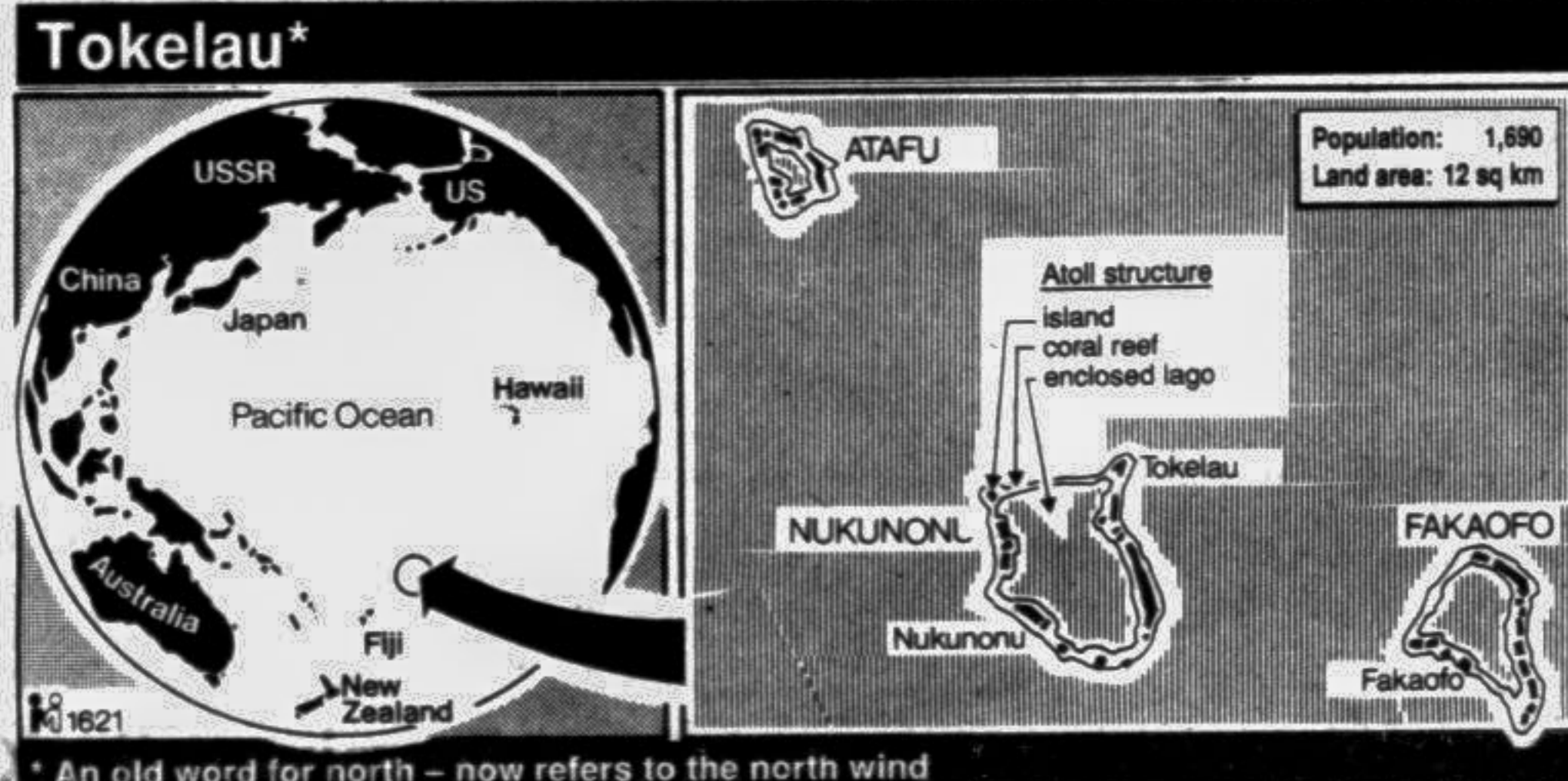
Tokelau says its situation is in full accordance with United Nations Charter on Human Rights. Colonialism does not properly describe its special relationship with New Zealand. Partnership, says Tokelau is a better word.

Tokelau is vulnerable. Its total land area of 12 square kilometres is washed over in cyclones. Rising ocean levels caused by global warming could be catastrophic. Fresh ground-water supplies are running out. Sedentary lifestyles lead to heart disease, cancer or obesity. In 1990 each Tokelauan received NZ\$2,426 in aid. Modest export earnings produce NZ\$380 per capita from stamps, handicrafts, import duties and souvenir coins. Tokelauans enjoy full rights as New Zealand citizens, and more of them now live in Auckland than on the atolls.

Decolonised Pacific islands, Tokelau argues, have inherited alien political and administrative structures at odds with their unique and traditional systems of government. Since independence they have had to undergo difficult reforms. Rather than "rush towards something it would be hard to undo," Tokelauans want time to work things out for themselves. Tokelau is one of the remotest places in the world. The Public Service is based in Apia, Western Samoa, 480 kms away. It communicates with the atolls by radio telephone at 3pm each

One of the world's most remote and oddest communities is Tokelau in the South Pacific. It consists of three atolls 60 miles apart from each other. In cyclones they are washed over. The islands are administered by New Zealand which lies 3,200 kilometres away. Pressure is growing for them to become fully independent by the year 2000. Gemini News Service reports that the people are not so keen on the idea.

by Anna Buckley



An old word for north — now refers to the north wind



In Tokelau no trucks, buses or cars disturb the pacific peace...

day [except Sundays when Christian taboos prohibit all activity].

Government employees receive instructions from what is called the General Fono (meeting) and report back on

atoll affairs. In the villages, however, the three Councils of Elders enjoy supreme authority. No one wants to be *faipule* (island leader), the name given to the three atoll representatives whose job it is to mediate

between General Fono and the Councils.

The General Fono is responsible for all administrative and political affairs concerning Tokelau as a whole, a system suggested by New Zealand to

ease Tokelau towards self-government. The Fono meets twice a year, hosted by each atoll in turn. The Administrator of Tokelau, a New Zealander, resides in the New Zealand capital, Wellington. He occasionally charts a plane to attend meetings, but prefers to keep a low profile.

In his absence the meeting is chaired by the *faipule*, attended by civil servants from Apia and delegations from each atoll, Fakaofu, Nukunono and Atafu. On the atolls a council of elders is also elected in each village every three years.

All adults in the village have the right to vote, although the choice of candidates is limited to the oldest men. The Elders meet one or two days a week to discuss village affairs, such as land rights, fishing times, imposition of the nightly curfew and closure of parts of the lagoon.

In recent years they have imposed several restrictions for the 'general peace'. There are sanctions against 'disruptive elements', such as long hair, long beards and miniskirts, severe penalties for drunken aggressiveness, and fines for the use of foul language in public.

The authority of the Elders has been undermined by the advent of the 20th century. Young men now learn science at school and not ancient tradition and ritual at the Elders' feet.

Not that graduates from Western Samoa and Auckland who join the Public Service command any more respect. To date few plans agreed by the Fono have been implemented in the villages.

The confusion surrounding authority is considerable. Questions are asked: 'Who are the people who run the government of Tokelau as distinct from the people of Tokelau?' 'What is the difference between 'politics' and 'administration', which are both covered by the same Tokelauan word, *malō*?'

The focus of political discussion in Tokelau is not Western-style democracy, or inadequate representation at the UN, but a more immediate source of inequality: pay. Both the Tokelau Public Service and the village Elders work for the common good. Why then, it is asked, are only government employees salaried?

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## No Indian Summer in Argentina

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wiped out by Indians. The Spaniards then abandoned the area for around half a century — leaving behind horses and cattle which were to proliferate the pampas.

In the mid-seventeenth century the wealth in livestock brought new Indian tribes onto the pampas, such as the fierce Araucanians from Chile.

Early Spanish settlements adopted a defensive posture against Indians. Outlying primitive forts gave early warning of, and helped head off, Indian raids on settlements.

Occasionally punitive expeditions against Indians were mounted, but with the risk of leaving settlements undefended. In 1724, while rural militia pursued raiders, Indians attacked Buenos Aires itself.

Spanish strategy with regard to Indians on the pampas remained essentially unchanged for centuries. Accommodation with Indians was never seriously considered by the Spanish settlers in Argentina. There was no long term policy of offering Indians land, seed and livestock trade-rights in exchange for peace. In fact the reverse was true: Peace was often accompanied by dispossession of land.

Soon after Argentina's independence in 1816, a land lease programme to promote frontier population, together with allotments of livestock to friendly Indians, was attempted. But this quickly degenerated into a huge land grab by powerful Creole landowners.

Argentina was wracked by feudal civil wars. *Caudillos*, as regional strong-arms were known, fought each other over land.

Solving the 'Indian problem' took second place despite the fact that Indian depredations took a heavy toll. From 1820 to 1879, Indian raids claimed 50,000 lives, 3,000 houses destroyed and 11 million cattle driven off.

One *Caudillo*, Juan Manuel Rosas, was stung by Indian raids in the southern pampa which carried off many of his own cattle. He called for one last effort to expel Indians forever from the plains. Rosas freed 634 captive whites and added thousands of square miles of grazing land to the nation.

These lands went to powerful allies rather than the soldiers' reluctantly pressed into service. This despite the fact that fron-

tier armies lost 50 per cent of their soldiers who were dead, wounded, missing or deserted.

Some 10,000 Indians were pacified with allotments of livestock and supplies of the gaucho staples of alcohol, tobacco and Paraguayan tea. But the subsidies ended when Rosas was driven to exile in England. The Indians took to warfare again and pushed the frontier back.

Indian chiefs, or *caciques*, could mobilise thousands of men. Major Indian raids in 1855 drove white settlers from the southern countries. Soldiers sent to fight Indians simply looted empty settler towns.

Argentines never seriously planned to integrate Indians into 'civilised' society. Defensive strategies kept Indians out and offensive strategies pushed them further back.

War minister Adolfo Alsina sent scientific expeditions to gather intelligence on Indian territory. Comically, the minister's plans and actions were reported in the Buenos Aires press and were read by chief Namuncura.

Indian chiefs mobilised 5,000 people and in December 1875 mounted the Great Invasion, killing 3,000 people and driving off 300,000 livestock.

On Alsina's death, his architect, Julio Roca, commenced a two-stage offensive in 1878. The first stage was successful in capturing 4,000 Indians — including chiefs Pincen, Catriel and Espumera — and retrieved 150 captives and 15,000 livestock.

The next year, Roca launched the so-called Conquest of the Desert. Within five months he captured five chiefs and 1,300 fighters. The fact that double that number of Indians were killed reveals the merciless nature of white-Indian military contacts.

In 1883, Roca declared 'wild Indians have disappeared, with no danger that they can return.' But the vastness of the territory meant some Indians continued to pose a threat for a few more years.

Chief Pincen reorganised his fighters and killed eight and injured 15 German immigrant settlers near Trenque Lauquen. But the end was in sight. In

January 1885, Chief Valentin Sayhuequi surrendered with 700 men and 2,500 women and children. The following month Chief Namuncura surrendered, ending all Indian resistance on the southern frontier.

Roca's offensive strategy and hard-line philosophy towards the Indians destroyed the prospects of any Indian role in the future Argentina. "Break the spirit of the Indian," Roca told his commanders, "and keep him full of fear and terror of us. That way instead of thinking of invading us he will think only of fleeing, seeking his salvation in the depths of the forest." Villages were burned and chiefs together with their women and children were exiled to Chile.

Of paramount importance was the use of technology for subjugation of Indians. Railroads moved troops and supplies, (distance covered rose from seven miles in 1857 to 3,000 by 1885 — built mostly by the British) and the telegraph network expanded, which supplied timely intelligence of Indian movements and relayed military commands.

The people belong to the land

New developments in firearms, such as six-shooter pistols and Remington rifles, turned the tide against the Indians. Remingtons allowed commanders to confidently attack Indian groups even when outnumbered. The acceptable ratio became one soldier with a Remington to five Indians.

Despite this, some Indians were successfully placed into military service. Those who were allowed to farm peacefully did so. Others had established a cross-border livestock trade with Indians in Chile. All this indicates that they could have been integrated into Argentine society. But the political and cultural will to do so was absent.

"We have been the victims of the greatest genocide in history," said a spokesman for an Indian organisation in Buenos Aires. "We have suffered devastating economic pillage, we are discriminated against in our own country, evicted from the land, and deprived of our own identity. Everywhere Indian culture is depreciated and ridiculed."

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## Tamizuddin Khan

Continued from page 10 for him to attend these institutions when his maternal grandfather, who had met my father at a railway station, decided to bear his educational expenses. He married my mother when he was barely nineteen. The bride remained in her father's house till my father's education was completed. He took his M A and law degrees from the University of Calcutta. Two Bengali novels published by him cannot be traced. I came to know of them from the obituaries published in the New York Times and Time of London.

## Unofficial Groups Highlight Native Rights

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At the end of the conference, Ibrahim Fall, conference secretary, claimed positive consensus, but former US president Jimmy Carter said that the UN was "almost totally incapacitated" in dealing with serious abuses. Alan Phillips, director of the London-based Minority Rights Group, said: "It was a useful meeting place for indigenous peoples, but it didn't advance their rights."

Salem Mezhoud, delegate for Britain's Anti-Slavery International (ASI), said the conference was "disappointing and frustrating."

He added: "We lost time and energy in reconfirming the declaration of 1948. But there was a new solidarity between many different NGOs, and an acknowledgement by the UN that economic development is now a fundamental human right. NGOs were not allowed to

use the proceedings to formally challenge the participating countries which have criminally and habitually offended against the 1948 Declaration. Controversial proposals for a high commissioner for the enforcement of human rights and an international court for the prosecution of criminal governments were put on the back burner. The headline Asian states opted for cosmetic compliance, without responsibility for implementation.

However, it should be recalled that the 1948 Declaration was approved by only 50 members, excluding China, while the Vienna Declaration — if agreed upon — will be approved by 180 members, including China.

And in the meantime, the NGOs, who don't rely on government funding, should take the Dalai Lama's implicit advice and cooperate to enforce economic, political and moral

sanctions.

ASI and other European NGOs have already formed the Alliance for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (ARIP). It demands that members should control their own resources, without state or international interference. No products taken from indigenous lands without consent should be imported by the European Community or its trading partners — the world's largest trading bloc.

No EC investments should be made on 'unfair terms, and aid should be withdrawn from offending states. Some Asian, North American and European NGOs have also cooperated in successfully calling for a ban on the import to the EC and US of carpets made by often indigenous child labour.

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## Aborigines Want Their Land Back

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However, despite the indigenous people's ongoing fight to regain their land, when it comes to hard cash, some of the leaders pull no punches about their priorities. One Aboriginal community, Jawoyin, recently warned off the conservation movement when it clinched a A\$1-billion gold mining deal in the Northern Territory. The community's leaders said they would back the company, Zapopan NL, to mine tribal land and would fight the ecologists in the "best interests of the Aboriginal people."

The proposed gold mine, about 300 kilometres south of Darwin, is believed to contain three million ounces of gold. The project has drawn extreme criticism from environmentalists. Jawoyin Association executive officer John Ah Kit said: "We've walked together with greens on a lot of causes. If we have to walk different paths from here on because we've made a decision that's in the best interests of our people who

live in poverty, then we'll box on with them any time they wish to enter the fray."

Only two years ago the community successfully blocked another mining venture. But this time they have traded their claim on mineral rights in exchange for the freehold title to 1800 sq. km of land, including the mine site, and such economic spin-offs as jobs, housing and scholarships for the community's children.

The Year of Indigenous People got off to a bad start when a canteen in Queensland's Gulf of Carpentaria was attacked by some 500 rioting Aborigines who escaped with 150,000 cans of beer. Following the riot the local airport was closed to stop further supplies from being flown in to the community of 1,500.

Minister Tickner — apart from supporting changes to landmark names — said initiatives he held for the indigenous people included the appointment of a social justice com-

missioner to report on whether governments were honouring recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and policy responses by governments to the High Court decision which offers Aborigines the chance to advance land claims.

For the non-Indigenous sector of Australians living in the Queensland capital of Brisbane, the withdrawal of a land rights claim to the city's Central Business District (CBD) following a bitter row between two indigenous tribes brought sighs of relief.

South East Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Legal Service vice-president Sam Watson, a member of the 300-strong Mununjali tribe, said the service would not fund a High Court land rights claim to the Brisbane CBD. The withdrawal followed an attack by Aboriginal elder and former Senator Neville Bonner, leader of the Jagera tribe. Bonner said under ancient law, Watson would have been put to death for trying to

grab another tribe's territory.

Bonner said: "The Jagera tribe would have gone to court to challenge Watson's claim to Jagera country. As leader of the tribe I told him to back off. This claim would have caused bloodshed between tribes."

While on the surface the Mununjali-Jagera tribal clash might not appear to be of much consequence to non-Indigenous Australians, it poses the question that if massive land rights were won by the nation's indigenous peoples, would this lead to a wave of violence?

Australian Aborigines have been described by an anthropologist as being the world's most primitive surviving race. For a race that had an estimated 400,000 population at the time of European settlement, that dwindled to some 40,000 in the 1950s and now is estimated at 257,000, The Year of Indigenous People is surely yet another challenge.

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