

Mongolians, Russians celebrate commonality with Navajos

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CHURCHROCK — Mongolian and Russian delegations from communities affected by mining have been visiting the Red Water Pond Road community since 2010. On Saturday, they were back at the home of Bertha Nez to compare notes on how their water and land have been affected by mining.

The International Water and Mining Exchange — coordinated by Paul Robinson, research director for Southwest Research and Information Center of Albuquerque — is in its sixth year.

This year's participants from Mongolia included Khatanbaatar Ravdan, a member of the Mongolian Parliament and the board of directors for the Center for Civic Education in Ulaanbaatar, and Narangerel Rinchin, who also became a member of Parliament and is now executive director of the Center for Civic Education and policy adviser for the Mongolian Environmental Civil Council in Ulaanbaatar.

Russian participants from the Buryat Region included Margarita Erbajeva, a geologist and paleoecologist with the Geological Institute at the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and Solonga Namsaraeva, a graduate student at East Siberian Technical University. Erbajeva and Namsaraeva are also technical advisers for the Buryat Regional Organization on Baikal, or BRO-Baikal.

Natalya Stukova, of Albuquerque, served as translator for the group.

Road to democracy

Perhaps fitting for an election year, Narangerel and Khatanbaatar talked about what life is like in a resource-rich country that has gone from Soviet rule to 26 years of living as a democracy.

“Although Mongolia was an independent state, the whole policy was directed from the Soviet Union since 1921,” Narangerel said, “which means the people of Mongolia suffered from communism about 70 years. Then in the late 1980s, there was a peaceful revolution from the communist regime to democracy.”

Narangerel, a Russian language and literature teacher, and Khatanbaatar, a mathematician, were actively involved in the 1990 democratic revolution and helped organize the first free election in almost 300 years in 1990. Before the Soviets, Mongolia lived under the colonization policy of China's Qing dynasty.



Mongolian visitor Narangerel Rinchin, center, hands out Halloween candy to local children during a meeting of the Red Water Pond Road Community Association Saturday in Churchrock. Rinchin said they don't celebrate Halloween in Mongolia but it is a tradition to give candy when they travel. Cable Hoover/Independent

“The rapid transition to democracy makes country people very much shaky,” Narangerel said. “It’s just 26 years since we shifted to the democratic way. After that election, in 1992, the new democratic constitution was adopted, which gives all the rights to the people to govern the country, to participate, to make decisions. It is written in the constitution that all power in this country belongs to the people of Mongolia.”

Khatanbaatar was one of the authors of the constitution.

At that time, Mongolia had fewer than 2 million people. Now, there are more than 3 million people living in a territory about twice the size of Texas. Thirty percent of the population are nomads who still live in the countryside and maintain the traditional way of life. Mongolia has about 70 million sheep, horses, cows, goats, camels and yaks, Narangerel said.

“We are lucky that we have the livestock,” she said. “We don’t have hungry in the country. We have lots of resources. We have lots of bright people who are becoming very famous in the world.”

Robinson said the socialist period was remarkable for the improvement in education and health care. The literacy rate of Mongolia, according to the 2010 Census, was 97.5 percent.



Khatanbaatar Ravdan uses his phone to take photographs of his hosts during a meeting of the Red Water Pond Road Community Association Saturday in Churchrock. Cable Hoover/Independent

Similar to Navajo Nation citizens who were forced to adopt the white man's way, during socialist rule the Mongolians were forbidden to speak about Ghenghis Khan, founder of the Mongol Empire and a popular historical leader of the country. Mongolia's unique style of vertical writing was changed into Cyrillic — the alphabet used by the Russians — in 1942, and all the national traditions were forbidden, Narangerel said. The herdsmen were not allowed to celebrate the Lunar New Year, which is tradition for all Asians, and the traditional attire of the people was unwelcome.

"You were a very good communist citizen if you speak very good Russian," she said.

Today, Mongolian currency shows the vertical script, a rendering of Ghenghis Khan and a picture of how rich nomads with their many livestock moved from one place to another.

Small fish in a big pond

"Economic development is very difficult because we are between two superpowers — China and Russia," Khatanbaatar said. "Both countries are not democratic. They used to push their policies on us. They like to keep us, Mongolia, dependent by energy, oil or something else. We planned and wanted to build hydropower stations on the Mongolian river, but Russians never allow us because this river, Selenge, goes close to Lake Baikal, which is in the territory of Russia."

Khatanbaatar said Mongolia has many energy resources — uranium, coal, solar, wind and hydro. “We could become independent from Russia,” he said. “Of course, we’re using the electricity from Russia, which is very expensive for us and which is not good for the economy as a whole. We’re buying the oil, gas from Russia with a very high price — the highest price in the world. Nowhere in the world is the price on the oil like we pay.

“The Chinese policies are different. For instance, if we want to produce some goods, the Chinese deliver to Mongolia lots of stuff, much, much cheaper than this product made in Mongolia. They do similar goods to the Mongolian market very cheap so nobody buys yours,” he said.

If Mongolia were to start constructing buildings or roads, the companies bring in Chinese workers instead of hiring Mongolians because the labor is much cheaper, he said. “But we don’t have a right,” he said. “We can’t block it with our laws because it is international. We are members of the World Trade Organization. We can’t say, ‘No Chinese coming to Mongolia.’ All this stuff makes it very difficult for industrial growth.

“For instance, just an example, in the 1990s Mongolia was a very, very poor country economically. At that time the United States wanted to support us, and they suggested to buy textiles from Mongolia in a big amount. Immediately, the Chinese companies — the same kind of factories — started to grow in Mongolia,” he said. “So they’re sending lots of people to Mongolia, giving them money if they go to Mongolia and make a small company to produce the same stuff by cheaper price. You see, Chinese smart policy.

“Two different neighbors, but the policies make us quite unhappy,” Khatanbaatar said. “But we still grow.”

One of the concerns nowadays is the environment. “Global warming is affecting Mongolia very, very much. Sixty-eight percent of the whole land is under desertification. Big problem. Big danger is this,” he said. “If global warming is going the same speed, in 2040, the herdsmen in Mongolia will have very, very bad situation. More than half of the country couldn’t be used for the herding.

“Most of the places, we have problems with water. But we have quite a big resource of groundwater. Unfortunately the surface water is all going out of the country to Russia. Every river flows to Russia,” he said.

There is also a concern about the Mongolian nationality, Khatanbaatar said. In China there are five main ethnic groups, one of which is the Mongols.

“There are about 3 million Mongols that live in China,” he said. “Of course, we have quite good relationship with the Mongols there. But the Chinese policy — the Chinese relations with the Mongols in China — it’s quite problematic. They live not bad, not like Tibetans, but of course they don’t have those kind of liberties we have in Mongolia.”



Bradley Henio, right, Edith Hood and Chuck Blackgoat cook a sheep's stomach to share with visitors during a meeting of the Red Water Pond Road Community Association Saturday in Churchrock. Cable Hoover/Independent

Narangerel said the Mongols have a very difficult time leaving China.

“They have to get visa to come to Mongolia, and many of them never get visa permission,” she said. “We worry about both China and Russia. We are very much dependent on those countries, but after the 1990s we have big support from the world community – so-called good neighbors like USA, Japan, Germany, so this helps us a lot.”