



Press Release

ICC Pikialasorsuaq Commission Calls for Postponement of Russian Rocket Launch

October 5, 2017 – Ottawa, Ontario.

The Inuit Circumpolar Council Pikialasorsuaq Commissioners are calling on the Governments of Canada and Denmark to demand the postponement of a Russian rocket launch scheduled to deliver a European Space Agency satellite to orbit on October 13th while alternative, non-toxic launch options are pursued. Russia has used and continues to use re-purposed SS-19 intercontinental ballistic missiles to launch commercial and military satellites. These launches have carefully planned trajectories, some of which drop the rocket's second stage containing an unknown amount of leftover hydrazine fuel into the Pikialasorsuaq or North water polynya. The environmental and health impacts of this action have not been studied in ocean waters and especially Arctic waters. The location where this potentially hazardous rocket fuel will fall on October 13th is in a high Arctic marine polynya, a biologically rich area of year-round open water that is the home and hunting region of Inuit from both Canada and Greenland.

“The Pikialasorsuaq Commissioners spent the past 16 months listening to the people who live and use this magnificent Arctic marine region and heard clearly that Inuit do not want any action that would affect the sustained productivity of the Pikialasorsuaq. In the soon-to-be-released Report “People of the Ice Bridge: The Future of the Pikialasorsuaq”, where we call on the governments of Canada, Greenland and Denmark to support the creation of a regional, Inuit-led management regime. The fact that space agencies are willing to use the Pikialasorsuaq/North Water as a toxic dump underscores the pressing need for local management of this sensitive ecosystem. These marine waters are in fact our source of food,” said Nancy Karetak-Lindell, International Commissioner and Acting Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council. “These Inuit communities rely on the marine wildlife for a significant part of their nutrition and the thought of hazardous rocket fuel and debris from space being deliberately deposited in the Pikialasorsuaq is unacceptable”, stated Kuupik Kleist, the Greenland Commissioner. Eva Aariak, the Canadian Commissioner, said “We raised this issue last year with little obvious effect as these launches are continuing despite the concern raised by Inuit.”

Kleist affirmed the Commissioners’ position and stated, “We urge the Governments to apply the precautionary principle to this issue and in the absence of certainty about the health and environmental risks of the residual hydrazine fuel and metal debris that will fall into this marine region, the launch must not proceed. The scientific record of disastrous effects in Kazakhstan and Russia cannot be ignored.”

Aariak stated, “The Government of Canada has an obligation to protect its citizens and the environment from the risk of contamination by such a dangerous chemical and a moral imperative that hazardous waste should not in any circumstance be deposited from land, ship or space into this unique and fragile ecosystem. There are international conventions for the protection of marine waters and the protection of people and the environment from space debris.”

“What is being planned by Russia and European Space Agency to launch a satellite where it will drop a fuel rocket into the North Water between Greenland and Ellesmere Island Canada is very disturbing and scary. Not only do we (Inuit) on both sides of the largest open water depend on the wildlife for sustenance, but the distance between the two countries is very small. The closest gap further north between the two islands is only 32 kilometers. The prospect of miscalculation is very real to us who live near the proposed debris field. What if we get killed?” offered Larry Audlaluk, an Inuit hunter from Grise Fiord.

“For millennia, Inuit have relied and continue to rely on a healthy marine environment that has always supported our culture, our communities, our health and our wellness. How can anyone believe that this is acceptable?” Karetak-Lindell said.

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Pikialasorsuaq, or “Great Upwelling”, is the largest Arctic polynya and the most biologically productive region north of the Arctic Circle. Pikialasorsuaq has been recognized by Inuit for generations as critical habitat. Communities in the Qikiqtani and Avanersuaq regions continue to rely on the polynya’s biological productivity. Pikialasorsuaq is vital to many migratory species upon which these communities, as well as farther afield, depend. In some recent years, the northern ice bridge in Kane Basin, Nares Straight and Smith Sound (Ikeq) has become less reliable and the polynya less defined. The consequences of these changes, linked to larger climatic shifts observable in many parts of the Arctic, are not known.

Led by three Commissioners, Nancy Karetak-Lindell (Acting chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council) the International Commissioner, Eva Aariak (former Premier of Nunavut) the Canadian Commissioner, and Kuupik Kleist (former Greenland Premier) the Greenland Commissioner, the Pikialasorsuaq Commission is mandated to conduct consultations in the communities in Nunavut and Greenland that are closely connected to Pikialasorsuaq. With the support of the Oak Foundation, Oceans North and World Wildlife Fund the Commissioners have undertaken consultations with Canadian Inuit communities in April (Grise Fiord, Resolute, Arctic Bay, Pond Inlet and Clyde River) and is currently in Northern Greenland to hear from Inuit on the Greenlandic side of the Pikialasorsuaq (Siorapaluk, Qaanaaq, Savissivik, Kullorsuaq, Nuussuaq and Upernavik). The consultations were designed to facilitate local and regional input, to incorporate indigenous knowledge, and to recommend an Inuit strategy for safeguarding, monitoring and management of the health of Pikialasorsuaq for future generations. The report is due to be released in October 2018.