

For centuries a 'lost' tribe on an island in the Indian Ocean has repelled all outside approaches. This week's killing of two fishermen who accidentally trespassed on their land showed how ferocious the Sentinelese really are



by Marcus Dunk

IT WAS a fishing trip that went horribly wrong. Having drifted on to a remote island in the Indian Ocean, two men found themselves face to face with members of one of the last Stone Age tribes. Armed with bows and arrows, clubs and spears, the semi-naked tribesmen set on the stamped pair, brutally murdering them in minutes.

For the inhabitants of North Sentinel, a remote speck of the Andaman Islands archipelago, such a response to this territorial intrusion is part of a pattern of violence that has marked most attempts at contact by outsiders with this tribe.

Believed to number anywhere from 10 to 160, the Sentinelese have lived in isolation on the island for 60,000 years, resisting attempts by authorities and anthropologists to study their culture and integrate them into the modern world.

Initially thought to have been badly affected by the tsunami on Boxing Day 2004, it was soon revealed that the islanders had moved to higher ground before disaster struck - almost as if they knew the giant tidal wave was coming.

So protective are the Sentinelese of their territory that an Indian coast-guard helicopter that attempted to retrieve the fishermen's bodies (they had been found in shallow beach groves after their killings) was greeted by a volley of arrows that the fishermen that prevented the craft from landing, leaving authorities uncertain whether they would ever be able to recover them.

There would be casualties on both sides, says the Andaman Islands Police chief, Jhannabhai Kumar. "The fishermen are out in large numbers, and we'll just get things cool down. If the fishermen go inland we might be able to speak back there and collect the bodies."

According to fellow fishermen who witnessed the killing from their boats, the two men - Sunder Raj, 48, and Pandit Thang, 52 - had tied their boat to an off-shore rock in the evening and begun a heavy drizzle session. At some point the rope came loose and the boat began to drift towards the shore. In a sudden slipper, both men remained blissfully unaware of the danger they were in.

As dawn came, the older fishermen tried to shout a warning to the men, to wake them up, warn them of the



danger and get their boat away from there," says Sagar Ashara, the head of the Society for Andaman and Nicobar Ecology, an environmental and conservation group.

But last August there was a tale. They just couldn't wake the men up and their boat drifted up on to the beach. That was it - they were overrun by the tribespeople and slain."

Environmental groups hope that the authorities will agree the bodies where they are and begin to more rigorously enforce the three-mile exclusion zone that is supposed to exist around North Sentinel - especially intruders - driven by the island's sea life around North Sentinel - regular intruders. For both environmentalists and the authorities, the need to maintain separation is not only for the protection of anyone landing on the island but for the Sentinelese themselves.

Although in the 1930s there was an established policy to isolate these tribespeople into modern society, a series of bitter experiences proved that, as everyone observed, it would be better if this island and its society remained an isolated remnant from a long-lost world.

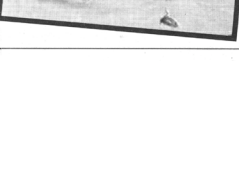
WHILE most people have never heard of it, existing as it does away from the main currents of the Andaman Islands, North Sentinel has been known of for centuries. Marco Polo had passed through the area in the late 13th century, describing the Andamanians as "a most brutish and savage race wearing heads, eyes and teeth like those of dogs. They are very cruel and kill and eat every foreigner whom they can lay hands upon."

But it was not until 1771 that it was first specifically mentioned by an East India Company survey vessel, which observed the lights from sea on the shore. The island seemed to be forgotten until 1867, when an Indian ship

Life among the savage Stone Age tribesmen



PRIMITIVE: The lifestyle of the isolated inhabitants of North Sentinel in the Indian Ocean has not changed for thousands of years



called the Nizorah was wrecked on its beach. The 150 survivors set up a temporary camp and were stranded a few days later. They managed to fend off the worst of the onslaught but, if it hadn't been for a Royal Navy steamer which arrived shortly after to rescue the ship, it is unlikely the wrecked group would have survived.

For the next hundred years the island and its people were left alone but rumors persisted about North Sentinel and its savage inhabitants. By the 1950s, most of the island's people of the Andaman Islands had either been contacted by outsiders or partially integrated into modernity by the Indian government, which felt it was integral to the area's progress.

With this in mind, a group of anthropologists, a film crew, a National Geographic photographer and a group of armed policemen made their way to the island in 1974, hoping to film the friendship of the Sentinelese using the tried and true methods of colonialists - the age-old strategy of gifts and plenty of gifts.

Unfortunately for this group of idealists, they failed. On landing and giving items such as a doll, pots and pans, coconuts and a live pig on the beach, a group of natives apparently brandished bows and arrows which proceeded to fire at the intruders. The film director was hit in the left thigh and the group made a hasty exit to their dinghy. From the safety of the water, they saw the Sentinelese women and children run a distance before finally interacting with the intruders in 1976. In this encounter, a group of Sentinelese

men peacefully approached Pandit and his companions and were climbed into the dinghy to curiously touch everything.

Pandit distributed coconuts, which the tribesmen eagerly took. Their language, however, was impenetrable, and it remains unknown to this day.

TOWARDS the end of the visit, Pandit in the water with a group of Sentinelese men pulled out a knife and pointed it threateningly at Pandit, obviously thinking that Pandit intended to stab on the island. This was the only moment of the visit that group returned, however, and Pandit left to meet us - it was unbelievable," he told Goodhart. "That there was a feeling of madness also. There was the feeling that at a certain point in human history these people were holding back, holding on, ultimately had to yield. It's like an eye in history gone."

Not long after this encounter it was decided that further attempts to make contact with the Sentinelese in 1976 when he was stationed in the Andaman Islands. According to the writer Adam Goodheart, who interviewed him in the 1980s, 778 Pandit made a number of trips to the island over a period of 20 years, observing men, women and children from a distance before finally interacting with the inhabitants in 1991. In this encounter, a group of Sentinelese

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With development, tourism and increasing encroachment further in this area, the likelihood of remaining isolated is ever seen a little yet unlikely dream.

They kill and eat every foreigner they can'