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Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Eighth Session

1st & 2nd Meetings (AM & PM)

'WE IGNORE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AT OUR PERIL', SAYS DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL,

AS PERMANENT FORUM OPENS EIGHTH ANNUAL SESSION AMID 'SWARM OF CRISES'

The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues this morning opened its eighth annual session aimed at finding ways to further implement the landmark 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, which gained momentum last month when the Australian Government officially endorsed the accord after previously voting against it.

The Forum's two-week session, in which some 2,000 representatives of indigenous groups, as well as representatives of Government, civil society, academia, the United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations were expected to participate, would also look at the relationship between indigenous peoples and industrial corporations, the need to promote corporation social responsibility, climate change, the Arctic region and land tenure.

In an opening address, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro said the Forum was meeting at a crucial time, as the world grappled with a "swarm of crises", including intensified hunger, poverty, global warming and security threats. Indigenous peoples had a record of resilience in the face of great adversity, but they still suffered from prejudice and marginalization. Indigenous women were brutalized by violence. Powerful forces continued to take land from indigenous peoples, denigrate their cultures and directly attack their lives. Such acts violated every principle enshrined in the Declaration and offended the conscience of humanity.

The Forum had resulted from a decades-long effort to put indigenous peoples' concerns on the global agenda, she said. A Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people was making heard the voices of indigenous survivors of human rights violations and was working with Governments to improve indigenous people's lives. United Nations agencies and other intergovernmental organizations had adopted policies on indigenous issues and were doing more to improve action on the ground. At the same time, indigenous peoples had greatly impacted the United Nations work, contributing to the Forum on Forests and the Commission on Sustainable Development.

Still, delegates must do more than just raise indigenous peoples' living standards. They must also heed their warning and seek their counsel in such shared objectives as sustainable development, which had been a priority for the indigenous world long before it became an international buzz word. Too often that wisdom and traditional knowledge was overlooked or stolen, and that must change. "We ignore indigenous peoples at our peril. But if we listen to them, society as a whole will benefit," she said. That meant bringing their contributions to the table in international negotiations, notably those leading up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December.

Newly elected session Chairperson, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz of the Philippines agreed, stressing the need to look at how indigenous people -- who had consistently criticized the unsustainable policies of deregulation, liberalization and privatization that had caused the global economic recession -- could in fact help solve those economic woes. The Indigenous Peoples' Global Summit on Climate Change,

held in April in Alaska, had recommended that decision-making bodies of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change create formal structures to fully bring indigenous people into discussions and policymaking, as well as organize technical briefings in which indigenous peoples could share their traditional knowledge and its relation to climate change.

Governments, United Nations agencies, international institutions and the private sector must also change their approach by increasingly mainstreaming indigenous peoples' issues into their work, respecting indigenous peoples' right to free, prior and informed consent, and increasing their participation in programme and policy design, implementation and monitoring, she said. Too often there was a lack of awareness and understanding that current formulas could not be applied to indigenous peoples, who had a right to pursue their own economic, social and cultural development, in accordance with local cultures, identities, traditional knowledge and livelihoods.

Ms. Tauli-Corpuz lauded Australia's Government for endorsing the landmark United Nations Declaration and Colombia's Government for supporting it during last month's Durban Review Conference on racism and racial discrimination. She expressed hope that those pronouncements would lead to better protection of and respect for indigenous peoples' rights in both countries. At the same time, she called on the Forum to work in partnership with United Nations agencies and programmes, drawing on each other's strengths, to ensure that the rights of indigenous people were protected. "Always keep in mind that we are talking here as partners, and not as protagonists. The odds we face in getting our rights respected and our self-determined development operationalized are many," she said.

Rachel Mayanja, Assistant Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, said United Nations agencies were in fact responding well to the Forum's recommendations on economic and social development. But follow-up to the recommendations was difficult, due to a lack of information from many Governments, particularly on the state of human development of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples grappled with extreme poverty, high infant and maternal mortality, as well as land rights and land ownership disputes. Human Development Reports should highlight their plight in order to identify those and other challenges to development. Future reports, she said, should include a section on the poorest-performing provinces or subregions and present disaggregated data to identify populations that were clear outliers of human progress. Implementing the Forum's recommendations required a long-term approach, and good practices should be compiled and disseminated.

General Assembly President Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann also lauded Australia's recent endorsement of the 2007 Declaration, and expressed optimism about developments in Latin America, where Bolivia had adopted the accord as national law. Partnerships to fully and effectively implement it were crucial. He also pointed to the Assembly's recent adoption of a resolution on indigenous issues, which called for a mid-term assessment report of the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People. Indigenous peoples continued to face marginalization, extreme poverty and other human rights violations that threatened their ways of life and, in some cases, survival. It was a "bitter irony" that while indigenous people did the most to protect Earth from "rapacious" agro-industrialists, they were most hurt by the global economic crisis. That injustice underscored the need to urgently implement the Declaration and goals of the Second Decade.

In keeping with tradition, the session was opened by an invocation, from Tododaho Sid Hill, Chief of the Onondaga Nation. Taking the floor next, a representative of the Assembly of First Nations Women's Council led delegates in a ceremonial song that honoured women as life-givers, providers, mothers, daughters, grandmothers and aunts.

During the meeting, the Forum adopted the agenda for the session and elected by acclamation Michael Dodson (Australia) as Rapporteur, and Tonya Gonnella Frichner (United States), Margaret Lokawua (Uganda), Elisa Canqui Mollo (Bolivia) and Pavel Sulyandziga (Russian Federation) as Vice Chairpersons.

Also speaking today were State members represented by observers from Germany, Brazil (also on behalf of the Brazilian National Foundation for Indigenous Issues), Chile, Ecuador, Canada and Colombia.

Speaking on behalf of United Nations specialized agencies and other intergovernmental organizations was a representative of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and a delegate speaking on behalf of the Secretary-General's Special Representative on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises.

Also delivering statements were members of the following caucuses and umbrella organizations: Global Indigenous Peoples' Caucus, African Caucus, New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council and Global Indigenous Women's Caucus.

Other statements were made on behalf of the Chief Deskaheh of the Haudenosaunee, and by both a professor at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA) and a human rights and administration of justice activist from Spain.

The Chairperson introduced the Report of the international expert group meeting on extractive industries, indigenous peoples' rights and corporate responsibility (document E/C.19/2009/CRP.8).

The Forum member from Bolivia presented a paper entitled "Impact of Corporations on the Lives and Territories of Indigenous Peoples" (document E/C.19/2009/CRP.11), while the Forum member from the Russian Federation spoke.

The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues will reconvene at 10 a.m. Tuesday, 19 May, to continue its eighth annual session.

Background

The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues opened today its eighth annual two-week session in which some 2,000 representatives of indigenous groups were expected to discuss ways to further implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which gained momentum last month when Australia officially endorsed the accord after previously having voted against it. Other issues to be taken up included the relationship between indigenous peoples and industrial corporations, climate change, the Arctic region and land tenure.

The Permanent Forum was established by the Economic and Social Council in 2000 to discuss indigenous issues relating to economic and social development, the environment, education, health and human rights. It is composed of 16 independent experts functioning in their personal capacities; eight are nominated by Governments and eight directly by indigenous organizations in their regions. (For additional information on the current session, see Press Release [HR/4979](#).)

Documents

Before the Forum were the session's agenda (document E/C.19/2009/1), proposed organization of work (document E/C.19/2009/L.1), and several documents related to indigenous peoples' concerns, including a concept note submitted by the Permanent Forum Special Rapporteurs on the extent to which climate change policies and projects adhere to the standards set forth in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (document E/C.19/2009/5); and a number of analyses prepared by the secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: on economic and social development (document E/C.19/2009/7); indigenous women (document E/C.19/2009/8); and the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples (document E/C.19/2009/9).

Also before the Committee was a note by the secretariat of compiled Reports received from the United Nations system and other intergovernmental organizations (document E/C.19/2009/10), including those of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC); secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR); International Organization for Migration (IOM); United Nations Department of Public Information; United Nations Department of Political Affairs; World Food Programme (WFP);

United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat); United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM); International Labour Organization (ILO); and Inter-American Development Bank.

Opening of Session

The opening proceedings of the Forum were presided over by Rachel Mayanja, Assistant Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

According to tradition, the session opened with expressions of gratitude to nature from TODODAHO SID HILL, Chief of the Onondaga Nation. He first gave thanks to the Mother Earth. Duties were also given to berries and trees. The maple tree was the leader of the trees and he asked all to put their minds together as one to give thanks. The leader of the berries was the strawberry that helped all to be at peace. Next, he gave thanks to the deer, leader of the animals that gave themselves for humankind, and then to the eagle, leader of the birds and the “winged ones”. He gave great and respectful thanks to the fresh water that helped Mother Earth carry out her duties. Foods replenished thoughts and minds and he asked all to “roll up their thoughts as one” in thanks. As for the gentle winds that strengthened the roots of all that was planted, he gave thanks to them for helping to “keep our minds straight”. Thunders replenished the water and he thanked them for carrying out their duties. Directing his thoughts to the sky, he thanked the sun for warming the Earth, the moon for moistening the Earth and the stars for helping the moon. He finally gave great thanks to the Creator who intended for humans to love one another in peace.

Taking the floor next, a representative of the Assembly of First Nations Women’s Council led delegates in a ceremonial song that honoured women as life-givers, providers, mothers, daughters, grandmothers and aunts. (A circle of women formed around the perimeter of the room.)

Introductory Statements

General Assembly President MIGUEL D’ESCOTO BROCKMANN, of Nicaragua, recalled that on 13 September 2007, the General Assembly overwhelmingly adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, saying that the challenge now was to fully and effectively implement that accord. “Partnerships are crucial to achieve this objective,” he asserted.

In that regard, he welcomed Australia’s recent endorsement of the Declaration. He also expressed optimism about developments in Latin America, where Bolivia had adopted the Declaration as national law. The Forum’s emphasis on accountability and its decision to devote the eighth session to the follow-up of its recommendations in three of its mandated areas was highly significant. He hoped that analysis of those recommendations -- and the in-depth dialogue with six United Nations agencies -- would strengthen partnerships. Indeed, the goals of the Second Decade of the World’s Indigenous People included the promotion of partnerships, and enhancement of monitoring mechanisms and accountability.

He also discussed the Assembly’s recent adoption of a resolution on indigenous issues, which called for a midterm assessment report of the Second Decade. Despite progress, indigenous peoples continued to face marginalization, extreme poverty and other human rights violations that threatened their ways of life and, in some cases, survival. The global economic crisis would have a further negative impact on them, and it was a “bitter irony” that those doing the most to protect Earth from “rapacious” agro-industrialists were most hurt by the crisis. That injustice underlined the urgency of action needed to implement the Declaration and goals of the Second Decade.

In that context, he drew attention to the 1-3 June summit, which would bring together leaders from 192 Member States to address the global and economic crisis and its impact on development. It was deeply relevant to indigenous peoples around the world who were struggling to have their voices heard. He closed by commending participants for their commitment to indigenous peoples’ rights. “In this time of broken promises and eroded trust, it is truly significant that you have placed both hope and trust in this United Nations Forum,” he said.

Following her election, by acclamation, as session Chairperson, VICTORIA TAULI-CORPUZ said the challenge today was to have a more in-depth understanding of the global economic recession and how it was affecting indigenous people worldwide. It was necessary to explore how indigenous people could help solve the crisis, even though they had not caused it. It was timely and highly relevant that this year's Forum would review implementation of its recommendations on economic and social development, indigenous women and the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People. Those recommendations called on Governments, United Nations agencies, international institutions and the private sector to change their approach to the indigenous world by increasingly mainstreaming indigenous peoples' issues into their work, respecting indigenous peoples' right to free, prior and informed consent, recognizing their collective rights, and increasing their participation in programme and policy design, implementation and monitoring.

She said there was often a lack of awareness and understanding that current programme and policy formulas could not be applied to indigenous peoples. Indeed, they had a right to pursue their own economic, social and cultural development, in accordance with their cultures, identities, traditional knowledge and livelihoods. That required their effective, meaningful participation in decision-making bodies at all levels, and equal partnerships with the State and private sector. "Racism and discrimination against indigenous peoples is still very much alive," she said, stressing that the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples should apply to indigenous peoples' particular historical context and present circumstances to combat racism. The United Nations was increasing its attention to indigenous women's issues. In March 2005, the Commission on the Status of Women adopted its first ever resolution on indigenous women. Indigenous women should be protected at all times and by all provisions of the Declaration.

Article 22 of the Declaration called for particular attention to the rights and special needs of indigenous peoples, and it called upon States to take steps to ensure that indigenous women enjoyed full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination, she said. Violence against indigenous women was a daily reality in many countries and its elimination must be an indicator for measuring progress in implementing the Declaration. She congratulated Australia's Government for endorsing the Declaration on 3 April and Colombia's Government for supporting it on 21 April during the Durban Review Conference. She expressed hope that those pronouncements would lead to better protection of and respect for indigenous peoples' rights in both countries.

Last year, the Forum had agreed to a new multi-year programme, in which one year would be dedicated to review and the following to policy, she noted. This year, the Forum would review implementation of recommendations and conduct in-depth dialogues with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Those dialogues would give indigenous people, Forum members and Governments a chance to better understand the challenges and opportunities faced by those six United Nations entities and the progress they had made to carry out their respective mandates on indigenous issues.

"I urge you to be critical, but to do this in a very constructive manner so that we can help strengthen each other's work for the sake of indigenous people," she said. "Always keep in mind that we are talking here as partners, not as protagonists. The odds we face in getting our rights respected and our self-determined development operationalized are many. So our approach should be geared towards strengthening partnerships so that we can consolidate our strength and gains to confront these odds."

This year's Forum would also include a regional focus on indigenous peoples in the Arctic region, with a 21 May discussion on the subject, she continued. Today, there would be a discussion on corporations and indigenous peoples, and next Wednesday there would be a discussion on the serious impact of the global economic and financial crisis on indigenous peoples. The crisis was caused by policies of deregulation, liberalization and privatization -- the main features of the dominant, globalized economic model consistently criticized by indigenous people for breeding further inequalities and being unsustainable. During the International Expert Group Meeting on Extractive Industries, Indigenous Peoples' Rights and Corporate Social Responsibility, held in March in the Philippines, indigenous representatives from affected communities noted that, although corporations were now

more willing to consult with indigenous peoples about their human rights and economic development issues, free, prior and informed consent was still not respected.

She said that the lack of full disclosure of information on environmental, social, cultural and human rights was a major problem. Corporations, in collusion with Government authorities, often selected indigenous individuals or specific communities as negotiation partners without ensuring that they in fact represented their respective communities or the affected area. That divided indigenous peoples within their communities. During the Expert Group Meeting, participants had also expressed frustration that extractive industries often treated benefit-sharing or social programmes as charity, rather than as a human rights issue.

The Indigenous Peoples' Global Summit on Climate Change, held in April in Alaska, had made several recommendations, such as calling on the decision-making bodies of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to create formal structures and mechanisms for the full, effective participation of indigenous peoples and to recognize and respect the climate change Declaration in climate change decisions, policies and programmes, she said. The Summit also recommended that the Convention organize technical briefing sessions by indigenous peoples on traditional knowledge and climate change, hire an indigenous focal point for its secretariat, and appoint an indigenous peoples' representative in funding mechanisms. It also recommended that the Convention provide financial and technical support to bolster those efforts.

She noted that, in April, the General Assembly had adopted a unanimous resolution designating 22 April as International Mother Earth Day. The Forum had conducted a mission from 25 April to 6 May to the Chaco Region of Bolivia and Paraguay to study the situation there of forced labour and semi-slavery of the Guarani and other indigenous peoples. It had met with the victims of forced labour and servitude, members of the Cattle Ranchers Association, various Government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations and senior United Nations staff. The Forum's report and recommendations on how to strengthen the capacities of the Governments of Bolivia and Paraguay to comply with their obligations under international human rights law would be presented next week to the relevant Government and intergovernmental bodies.

United Nations Deputy Secretary-General ASHA-ROSE MIGIRO said the Forum's meeting had arrived at a crucial time: the world was coping with a "swarm of crises", including intensified hunger, poverty, global warming and security threats. But indigenous peoples had a record of resilience, and the Forum had resulted from a decades-long effort to put their concerns on the global agenda. That drive had culminated in 2007 with the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Today, there was a Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, and an Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at the Human Rights Council, she explained. The Special Rapporteur was making heard the voices of indigenous survivors of human rights violations and, thanks to that work, more Governments had been engaged in dialogue to help improve indigenous people's lives.

She said the United Nations itself was increasing efforts to be more engaged on indigenous issues. United Nations agencies and other intergovernmental organizations had adopted policies on indigenous issues and were doing more to improve their action on the ground. She looked forward to seeing the vision of a "One UN" become a reality in that work. At the same time, indigenous peoples had used their voices to greatly impact the United Nations work, having contributed to the Forum on Forests and the Commission on Sustainable Development, and States had taken the step of endorsing the Declaration.

She said that, while those were important achievements, they were not enough, as indigenous peoples around the world still suffered from prejudice and marginalization. Indigenous women were brutalized by violence. Powerful forces continued to take land from indigenous peoples, denigrate their cultures and directly attack their lives. Such acts violated every principle enshrined in the Declaration and offended the conscience of humanity.

In that context, she urged delegates to do more than just raise living standards for indigenous peoples. "We must listen to their voices, heed their warnings and seek their contributions to achieving our shared objectives," she stressed. They had been living up to the principle of sustainable

development long before it had become an international buzz word. But too often, their wisdom and traditional knowledge was overlooked or -- worse -- stolen. That must change.

“We ignore indigenous peoples at our peril. But if we listen to them, society as a whole will benefit,” she said. That meant bringing their contributions to the table in international negotiations, notably those leading up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December.

Looking across the room, she saw a beautiful tapestry of diversity stitched together with a common purpose: protecting our planet and its most vulnerable cultures and peoples. By uniting different strengths to reach common goals, delegates could help address the many threats facing humanity for the sake of present and future generations.

RACHEL MAYANJA, Assistant Secretary-General, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, said significant inputs received for the eighth session included information from 12 Governments -- a record number -- as well as 24 documents from United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations, 12 indigenous peoples' organizations and papers by Forum experts.

Highlighting various conclusions and recommendations from those reports, she said that, in the area of economic and social development, United Nations agencies had responded well to the Forum's recommendations. The Forum should explore a methodology to encourage United Nations country teams to participate in the follow-up process. In terms of Governments, the follow-up process was more difficult due to a lack of information from many States, and indigenous peoples' groups should be encouraged to participate more actively in that process at local, national and international levels. Implementation of the recommendations required a long-term approach, and she recommended that good practices be compiled and disseminated.

Pointing to another insight, she said desk reviews of one regional and nine Human Development Reports conducted this year had shown that, except for one country, there was very little information on the state of human development of indigenous peoples. None of the reports provided disaggregated data in the context of the Millennium Development Goals. In the case of the African countries and one Asian nation, indigenous peoples were not explicitly mentioned, except as part of the collective poor. Extreme poverty and high incidence of infant and maternal mortality were among the most pressing problems, while land rights and land ownership disputes were also a major concern.

She said Human Development Reports should highlight the plight of indigenous peoples, as their inclusion was imperative to, among other reasons, identify development challenges and their role in achieving the Goals. Future reports should include a section on the poorest-performing provinces or subregions and present disaggregated data to identify populations that were clear outliers of human progress.

Turning to the Forum's