

22 May 2007



Press Conference

United Nations

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York
PRESS CONFERENCE ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Indigenous and tribal peoples -- especially those living on slowly sinking small islands and in increasingly polluted mountain ranges -- were now the “human face” of the devastating effects of global warming, and the traditional knowledge that their communities possessed should be tapped in the search for answers on how to craft an international response to climate change, an official from the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity told reporters today.

“What has been missing in all the research done on global warming and the loss of biodiversity has been an examination of the social factors, or a look at the ‘human face’ of the [phenomenon], and it is now clear that indigenous and local communities highly vulnerable to climate change are providing that face,” said John Scott, Social Affairs Officer, Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, during a Headquarters press conference.

Mr. Scott was in New York to launch the Convention Secretariat’s draft report on the effects of climate change on indigenous and tribal communities, in connection with the International Day for Biological Diversity [22 May] and the sixth session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, currently meeting at Headquarters. The report focuses on climate change and its effects on indigenous communities in the Arctic region, in small islands and in high-altitude areas. It stressed, among other things, that indigenous and local communities’ traditional knowledge, innovations and practices were an inseparable part of their culture and, as such, should be protected and utilized in the development of measures to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Reading out a statement on behalf of the Convention’s Executive Secretary, Ahmed Djoghlaif, Mr. Scott said that every hour perhaps three species -- the result of thousands of years of evolution -- perished as a result of climate change. The loss of biodiversity was real and the part human activity played in that process was inescapable. He added that, in the coming decade, the loss of species would be on a par with the extinctions caused by mass events in past millennia.

Responding to questions, he stressed that expanded communication between indigenous groups, Governments and international organizations, scientists and civil society groups was critical in adapting to the climatic changes that were already under way and averting the worst consequences of global warming. He noted that the Convention called for Governments and parties to “respect” indigenous knowledge and culture. That was a particularly important inclusion point because some Western nations had continually dismissed such knowledge as “folklore”, when it was really the result of thousands of years of experience.

Among the four indigenous panellists joining Mr. Scott was Mattias Ahren, of the Sami people of Norway, who said that, while he usually addressed United Nations gatherings in his professional guise as a trained international lawyer on indigenous rights, he was speaking to reporters today as a reindeer herder, his traditional occupation. He described how severe changes in weather patterns affected reindeer herds, noting, among other things, that more snow on the ground would make it difficult for reindeer to get to the lichen and other plants that were essential to their diets.

At the same time, he said the Sami elders had years ago raised the alarm that it was raining more than ever during the winter in a place where few could remember anything but snow. While herd numbers were holding steady, he believed that it was only a matter of time before breeding cycles were affected, migration paths were flooded and grazing areas would be devastated. That would, in turn, affect the livelihoods of the herders, who were largely the keepers of Sami knowledge and cultural heritage.

Roberto Berreo, a member of an indigenous group from Puerto Rico, said that his elders had also noticed dire changes caused by global warming. Puerto Rico was home “mile for mile” to more threatened and imperilled natural species than any other “United States territory” except Hawaii. He drew attention to the effect of climate change on coral reefs around Puerto Rico and on plant life on the island. That was affecting the gathering of plants for traditional medicines, putting pressure on efforts to continue traditional practices.

Lakan Bibi, a representative of indigenous peoples in the Hindu Kush mountain range in Afghanistan and areas of northern Pakistan, said that she was representing the Indigenous Peoples Survival Foundation, which dealt with the concerns of communities living in the region’s mountains. Her community’s agriculture was fed by melting glacial waters that normally washed gently down from the mountains.

But her community had noticed more rain and flooding, which had sparked an increase in avalanches, she continued. During one such avalanche, a breakaway glacier “about the size of Central Park” had swept away an entire village. Other avalanches and mudslides had crushed or drowned cattle, and had muddied drinking waters. Indigenous knowledge could complement scientific efforts, she said, calling for indigenous peoples to be included in discussions about global warming.

Malia Nobriga, from Hawaii, said that climate change was a crisis to which all United Nations agencies and Member States should respond urgently. Climate change was pressuring the Pacific islands in myriad ways, as fisheries were under threat, and mangroves, which provided most of the region’s timber, were drying up or catching fire due to weather anomalies. Worst of all, people in the region feared that the island of Tuvalu would soon be “no more”, as it was being swallowed up by the slowly but steadily rising tides.

Many in the region called for “the polluter pays” strategy to assist small island States, since their nations contributed the least amount of greenhouse gases but were bearing the brunt of the pollution produced by big industrial countries. She also called for more creative thinking on ways to address the matter. She said that small island indigenous groups had called on the Permanent Forum to consider climate change as a special theme at its next session.

* * * * *

For information media • not an official record