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Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Sixth Session
14th & 15th Meetings (AM & PM)

DANGERS OF CLIMATE CHANGE ALREADY THREATENING TRADITIONAL CULTURES,

URGENT RESPONSE NEEDED, INDIGENOUS FORUM TOLD

As the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues today wrapped up discussions on its future work, representatives of tribal and native peoples from all regions called on the expert body to urgently examine the dangers of climate change, which was already threatening their traditional cultures as grasslands withered, glaciers melted, ocean temperatures rose, and coral reefs disappeared.

Adding his voice to the call for climate change to be the theme for next year's session, the representative of Habitat Pro, an Andean indigenous organization, reminded the Forum that, despite the fact that indigenous peoples would be primarily affected by global warming, their plight had barely been mentioned during the just-concluded session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, which had focused on climate change and air pollution.

"Global warming does not recognize borders, peoples or continents," he said. Increasing sea levels and shrinking glaciers adversely affected the flow of drinking water and fishing prospects. He urged the Forum to speak clearly and openly with Governments about addressing indigenous issues distinctly, rather than in a "packaged" manner. By way of warning, he added that countries relying on corn and agro-industrial products to diversify away from oil-based fuels would continue to seize traditional lands.

Echoing that call, the representative of the Indigenous World Association and associated organizations stressed that climate change remained an urgent and cross-cutting issue that impacted indigenous peoples' environment, economic development, culture and human rights. It had emerged as a particular priority in the Pacific, where indigenous peoples were impacted by global tides and changes in the marine food chain. Tuvalu had a dire need for assistance in handling rising tides. The phenomenon also was tragically impacting the Arctic and disrupting the planet's entire hydro and marine cycle.

Responding, Chairperson Victoria Tauli-Corpuz said that, after hearing the pleas of so many organizations that had spoken on the issue over the past two days, the experts had agreed to make climate change the special theme of next year's session. She added that the decision would be formally announced tomorrow when the Forum adopted the provisional agenda for its seventh session.

Summing up some of the other issues that had been raised, she said the Forum would work to reduce the number of recommendations it made and tomorrow review them individually. The responsibility to disseminate information lay with the indigenous organizations. Regarding the methods of work for next year, she said the Forum would recommend holding parallel sessions, which would make it easier to more closely examine relevant issues. That matter would need to be discussed further, however, as it would require additional funds.

Another idea on the Forum's future work came from the representative of the Rapa Nui peoples living off the coast of Chile, who asked that immigration, particularly stemming from mainland to island, remain a top-of-mind issue. He explained that the Chilean Government was perpetuating problems on his island by allowing immigrants from continental Chile to arrive. Schools were overcrowded and the health system that existed could barely support traditional inhabitants, let alone an influx of new people. Acknowledging the Government position that it was unconstitutional to restrict Chilean citizens from coming to the island, he nonetheless argued that his people were being forced to accommodate that new situation.

In the afternoon, the Forum heard from a representative from the Peruvian Amazon region, who proposed that the panel take up the theme "indigenous peoples living in isolation" for the next session. He said his peoples were living under occupation, particularly from oil companies. The State decision to place oil concessions up for bidding represented an action against the rights of isolated peoples. Explaining that Peru was not a party to International Labour Organization Convention 169 on indigenous rights, he called for full respect of the pre-existing rights of isolated peoples in the region.

Additionally, he urged Governments to respect the Convention; the Organization of American States (OAS) to speed procedures to call on its member Governments to protect isolated peoples; the World Health Organization (WHO) to approve implementation guidelines for States to handle health emergencies of isolated peoples; and the United Nations to establish a supranational body to take action against Governments that had shown disrespect for the rights of those living in isolation.

When Forum experts took the floor, Willie Littlechild of Canada and Special Rapporteur presented written submissions that had been received during this session by four indigenous communities. Those groups included the Samson Cree Nation, which asked for a lifting of a 2 per cent cap on funding for education; the Quebec Women's Association, which called for adoption of the Declaration; the Cape Mudge First Nation community, which reiterated the importance of judicial independence, particularly at the Supreme Court level; and the Tse'kene community, which voiced concern at mining and industrial development in their territories and sought better relations with companies. He added that he supported the Youth Caucus' suggestion yesterday that a young person be assigned to Forum members as an apprentice.

The discussion then turned to two Forum members for whom this would be the last session. Forum member Ida Nicolaisen, Government-nominated expert from Denmark, said the main questions for the future would centre on extending the reach of the Forum "beyond this room" to indigenous peoples, and focusing on States that had developed an indigenous strategy, but come up against problems implementing it.

She singled out a few suggestions, first thanking the Youth Caucus. She encouraged the Forum to find more formalized ways for integrating youth into its work, notably by designating youth apprentices, who could spur creativity in tackling the range of serious problems. She also urged indigenous peoples' organizations to include more young people in their delegations and the Voluntary Fund to sponsor more young people.

Eduardo Aguiar De Almeida, expert from Brazil, pointing out the Forum's positive developments in preventing war, overcoming colonialism and improving human rights, said such progress would have been unthinkable years ago. However, many countries still failed to prevent the mass exclusion of indigenous peoples and effectively combat colonialism. Today, the dominant perceptions of human rights, justice, national security and balance of power were no longer suitable -- they required profound change. Assuming they were still universal values, they must adapt to new planetary emergencies and encourage the achievement of environmental sustainability. He urged States that had resisted supporting the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to change their positions.

The Permanent Forum will reconvene tomorrow at 10 a.m. to adopt the provisional agenda for its seventh session.

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