

19 May 2006



Economic and Social Council

HR/4893

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Fifth Session
8th Meeting (PM)

SPEAKERS CALL ON UN FORUM TO STEP UP LEADERSHIP ROLE, DO EVEN MORE

TO DRAW ATTENTION TO PLIGHT OF INDIGENOUS

Many Express High Hopes for Work of Forum, but Say Recommendations on Human Rights, Development Concerns Not Implemented

As the fifth annual session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues reached its midpoint today, its participants made a call for that body to step up its leadership role and do even more to draw attention to the plight of indigenous and tribal communities, while promoting development in a manner that fostered full respect for the dignity, human rights, and uniqueness of indigenous peoples.

A representative of the Indigenous Peoples' Survival Foundation was among the speakers who had high hopes for the work of the Forum, whose mandate as an advisory body to the Economic and Social Council is to discuss indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, environment, education, health and human rights. However, a representative of the Defensoria de los Pueblos Indigena del Ecuador made a passionate plea for more practical efforts to achieve results, asking for an expansion of the number of the Forum's experts, which now stands at 16, and improvements in the work of its secretariat.

A representative of the Peace Campaign Group noted that the Forum had already made numerous recommendations addressing the concerns of indigenous peoples, including those related to human rights and development. However, no perceptible progress had been observed in the situation of many indigenous communities, including the Jumma people in Bangladesh, as States had failed to comply with their commitments to those recommendations. The speaker called on the Forum to ask Member States to implement its recommendations, recognize indigenous peoples' right to self-determination and comply with treaties, agreements and constructive arrangements between States and indigenous peoples.

Many speakers focused on the Programme of Action of the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, which had been launched at the opening ceremony of the

fifth session last Monday. The end of the Decade in 2015 coincides with the year benchmarked for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, building a close overlap of the two issues. The Permanent Forum this year focuses on the theme “Millennium Development Goals and indigenous peoples: redefining the Goals”.

Part of the failure of the Millennium Development Goals and poverty reduction efforts in Nigeria had been the complete lack of participation and inclusion of the indigenous community and continuing deterioration in the human rights situation in the country, a speaker said. “There is no way we can redefine the MDGs without a rights-based approach, which recognizes our right to organize ourselves and to seek our right to control our land and its resources”, he said, adding that those rights were central to the attainment of the goals on poverty, health and environmental sustainability.

Commenting on the need to accommodate indigenous peoples’ needs in implementing the Millennium Development Goals, a speaker noted that, while China, India and wider South-East Asia had been in the news for the past few years because of their startling economic development growth, the media eye had overlooked the dire situations of the indigenous peoples in those countries and regions. Indeed, throughout the South Asian region, the situation of indigenous peoples was deteriorating; they were being marginalized and were struggling for survival.

With that in mind, he called for the global community to not only boost aid to the indigenous people of the regions, but for intergovernmental organizations to increase their oversight to ensure the veracity of origin, as well as the destination of those resources because, in many instances, they were just not reaching needy indigenous populations. He stressed that, while the international community had set up myriad defences to counter transnational organized crime, it had not taken any such measures to deal with misuse of development monies.

Another call to the Forum related to the need to urgently initiate studies into the effects of the methamphetamine drug trade on indigenous populations in the Americas -- the health-related fallout not only from the use of the drug, but also from ingesting harmful chemicals used during its production. Also mentioned was the problem of landmines on San lands in Angola. The need to preserve Mother Earth to ensure human survival was addressed by a speaker, who also objected to dehumanization of people through such terms as “productivity units” in the manufacturing process.

A speaker called upon Governments to be more amenable to adopting flexible mechanisms to strengthen indigenous governance, as a new way to consolidate a new pluralistic and representative democracy. Many of today’s political systems were inherently linked to an economic model that exploited the rights of indigenous peoples and made their communities vulnerable. With “free trade” treaties worsening the conditions of inequality and social injustice, United Nations agencies should coordinate efforts to analyse the impact of international negotiations on the livelihood and development of indigenous peoples.

On a related issue, a participant in the dialogue called on the Forum to urge multinationals, including the World Bank, to reform their policies to allow for full participation of indigenous peoples. While the indigenous people in Ecuador had developed some defences against

“the pillaging of water and natural resources by neo-liberal globalization and invasive multinational corporations”, United Nations agencies should also convene high-level meetings to discuss the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Ecuador and other States in the region should also convene “peoples’ councils” to discuss the impact of the practices of multinational corporations on the Amazon.

Among other recommendations presented to the Forum were calls for an international conference on preserving the rights, languages and cultures of the world’s indigenous peoples; creation of opportunities for indigenous peoples through the use of new information and communications technologies; and inclusion of joint family planning and forest conservation strategies in all development initiatives.

On the latter, a speaker said that there was no hope for large population of the world’s indigenous people without such measures, because in many countries the very habitats and livelihoods of indigenous peoples had been snatched away from them – and then overrun or spoiled because of explosive population growth. He added that the scramble for land and natural resources had already begun and that there were hundreds of tiny indigenous communities in Asia, Africa and South America that were in extreme danger of vanishing altogether.

The Forum will continue its work at 10 a.m. Monday, 22 May.

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