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Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Fifth Session
16th & 17th Meetings (AM & PM)

UN FORUM RECOMMENDS ADOPTION OF DECLARATION ON INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

BY 61ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY, AS FIFTH SESSION CONCLUDES

Texts Address Indigenous Participation in Achieving, Anti-Poverty Goals, Africa's Indigenous, Second International Decade, among Others

Convinced that a declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples will be an instrument of great value to advance the rights and aspirations of the world's indigenous and tribal peoples, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues today recommended the adoption of the most recent version of the long-negotiated draft of a declaration, by the General Assembly sixty-first session, in one of nine sets of draft recommendations and three draft decisions the Forum approved by consensus at the close of its fifth session.

The Forum stated that, such adoption, would represent a major achievement for the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples, launched on 15 May, and Forum Chairperson Victoria Tauli-Corpuz of the Philippines added in her closing remarks that eventual adoption was "crucial", because that would be the framework for a real partnership to be forged between Governments and indigenous peoples.

The Permanent Forum, a 16-member subcommittee of the Economic and Social Council, is mandated chiefly to provide expert advice on indigenous issues to the Council and the wider United Nations system; raise awareness and promote the integration and coordination of activities relating to indigenous issues with the United Nations system; and prepare and disseminate information on indigenous issues.

In a text focusing on the session's theme, "the Millennium Development Goals and indigenous peoples; redefining the Goals" (document E/C.19/2006/L.2), approved as orally amended, the Permanent Forum noted that many indigenous people were concerned that developed countries treated the Goals as a matter of foreign policy, relevant only to international aid programmes. The Forum, therefore, urged developed countries to adopt national processes to implement the Goals, with "the full and effective" participation of their indigenous communities.

Appreciating that it might not be possible to redefine the Goals -- a set of ambitious targets ranging from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS, and providing universal primary education, all by 2015 -- the Permanent Forum noted the need for the inclusion of indigenous peoples in all evaluation and stricter monitoring processes on the progress towards the Goals, and strongly encouraged all States to provide disaggregated data on health and social welfare indicators, to understand where indigenous societies stand in the process.

The text also reflected the Permanent Forum's concern for Africa's indigenous groups, urging African Governments to ensure the full participation of indigenous peoples in the development of policies regarding implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, and, among other things, to invite representatives from indigenous peoples' organizations to participate in round-table dialogues, as a way to resolve conflict, while protecting indigenous peoples from armed conflict, particularly in the Sudan, the Great Lakes region, Niger Delta and Sahara regions.

In a related text on recommendations that emerged from its half-day discussion on Africa (document E/C.19/2006/L.3/Add.3) the Permanent Forum recalled that, in Africa, the expression "indigenous peoples" gives rise to questions. Few African countries recognize the existence of indigenous people in the States, and even fewer recognize them in their constitutions or national legislations.

The Permanent Forum urged African States, in coordination with the African Union and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, and the United Nations system to support/organize two regional conferences/seminars in Africa -- one for French-speaking States and the other for English-speaking States -- to enhance indigenous organizations' capacity to engage in dialogue with Governments at the country level to promote understanding of indigenous issues, including through teaching indigenous languages in schools, recognizing and sustaining indigenous knowledge systems, and, among other things, designing regional strategies to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

Overall, the texts lament the absence of information on issues such as economic marginalization, migration, the spread of HIV/ AIDS, and the "staggering prevalence" of diabetes in indigenous societies.

And, recognizing that the Millennium Goals do not address the specific needs of indigenous peoples, the Permanent Forum urged States to urgently collect disaggregated data and adopt culturally sensitive indicators to monitor the implementation of the Goals among indigenous peoples (document E/C.19/2006/L.3/Add.2).

With the end of the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People coinciding with the 2015 benchmark year for the achievement of the Millennium Goals, the Permanent Forum recommended that Governments, United Nations agencies and indigenous people's organizations elaborate and develop strategies and action plans for communication, education and public awareness on indigenous issues during the International Decade, addressing different audiences.

In anticipation of the first session of the new United Nations Human Rights Council, the Permanent Forum recommended that indigenous issues be a standing agenda item of the Council, and due attention be paid to the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples.

Their active participation should be ensured when matters affecting their rights were discussed by the Council and any subsidiary bodies or processes it decides to establish (document E/C.19/2006/L.3/Add.1). It also urged Member States to provide information on the status of indigenous peoples residing on, or across, State border areas, in relation to their safety and human rights concerns.

By another text, containing recommendations on indigenous women, children and youth (document E/C.19/2006/L.3), the Permanent Forum recommended that appropriate United Nations agencies take immediate action to review and monitor the situation of indigenous women and girls, and provide comprehensive reports on violence, particularly sexual violence in the context of armed conflict.

Deeply concerned that the problems and discrimination facing indigenous children and youth were not reflected in the Millennium Development Goals, the Permanent Forum urged States and United Nations agencies to develop culturally sensitive policies, programmes and projects that fully incorporated indigenous children and youth in achieving the Goals. The text also recommended that the Secretary-General, in his study on violence against women, address the situation of indigenous women and girls, whose suffering was based not only on gender, but also on ethnicity and culture.

Among the draft decisions approved by the Permanent Forum and recommended to the Economic and Social Council for adoption, was a text setting the dates, 14 to 25 May, and venue, the United Nations Centre in Bangkok, of the panel's sixth session (document E/C.19/2006/L.4). In connection with that text, the Secretariat informed the Forum that holding the meeting would require that an additional appropriation of some \$170,000 would have to be sought from the General Assembly.

By another decision forwarded to the Council, the Permanent Forum decided to authorize a three-day expert group meeting on the Convention on Biological Diversity international regime in New York, 17 to 19 June 2007 (document E/C.19/2006/L.5). In connection with that decision, the Secretariat informed the Forum that preliminary estimates indicated that the event would require that an additional \$87,000 would have to be sought from the Assembly. The Economic and Social Council is expected to examine the overall estimate of some \$357,300 in additional funds at its substantive session this July.

The final decision approved today would have the Council decide that the coordination segment of its 2007 session would be devoted to indigenous issues (document E/C.19/2006/L.7).

The Permanent Forum also approved the provisional agenda for its sixth session (document E/C.19/2006/L.6); its draft report (document E/C.19/2006/L.9); and draft recommendations on its future work (document E/C.19/2006/L.6).

Ms. Tauli-Corpuz, as she closed the session, said it had been "quite historical", because it had come at a time when the United Nations was undergoing far-reaching reform, particularly with the establishment of the new Human Rights Council. There would be a crucial role for the Forum to play in helping to shape the Council, she said, adding that the Forum's mandate to help coordinate and provide advice to United Nations bodies and agencies was something to take seriously. In this case, that meant not only influencing Council's shape, but ensuring that it was a body where indigenous peoples could go to seek solutions to historical injustice.

She went on to note that, during the dialogue held over the past two weeks, there had at times been tensions between indigenous peoples and Governments, but that, no matter how sensitive the issue, the participants had come up with constructive recommendations and suggestions on ways to bridge the gap between the two sides. It was the Forum's responsibility to make sure that dialogue existed, she said.

José Antonio Ocampo, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and Coordinator for the Second International Decade, said the Forum's session, with its "intensity, robust debates and thoughtful conclusions", convincingly spoke to the tripartite partnership of Member States, the United Nations system and other intergovernmental organizations and indigenous peoples. The session renewed their commitment to strive, within the framework of the United Nations Charter, to achieve development, peace and security, and human rights for and with the indigenous peoples of the world.

The substantive output of the session was commendable. The Forum had reiterated that the human right-based approach to development must be given practical effect for indigenous peoples.

The Forum had made valuable recommendations on how to interpret and apply the Millennium Development Goals in practice, so that indigenous peoples could be included in, and benefit from, the efforts of the international community to achieve them, he said.

Data collection and disaggregating was again stressed by the Forum as a crucial issue. Special emphasis was placed on involving indigenous peoples in building understanding of what poverty and well-being was for indigenous peoples. In its gender-related recommendations, the Forum demanded, in turn, a commitment to implement the Millennium Development Goals for indigenous peoples on the basis of gender equality. The Forum also recommended urgent measures on the part of Governments concerning the spread of HIV/AIDS. And it recommended special and culturally sensitive measures for preventing maternal and infant mortality in indigenous communities.

The Forum wrapped up its session with a ceremony that included songs performed by the Indigenous Youth Caucus.

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