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Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Fifth Session

11th Meeting (PM)

UN FORUM SPEAKERS CALL FOR RESOURCES, LEGISLATION TO HELP END DISCRIMINATION,

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION, VIOLENCE FACED BY INDIGENOUS WOMEN, YOUTH

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues today took up the precarious situation of indigenous women and children, with speakers calling on Governments to devote resources and target legislation, policies and services to support indigenous families, as well as provide culturally appropriate education and health care, to help end the routine discrimination, sexual exploitation and violence indigenous women and youth faced.

Continuing their thematic discussions with the Permanent Forum, representatives of indigenous groups and tribal communities emphasized that improving the lives of indigenous children was crucial not only for their own health and well-being, but for the overall future of indigenous peoples. As for indigenous women -- often the most disadvantaged and marginalized group in any country -- the participants made a strong call for the equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all individuals, both men and women.

A representative of the Indigenous Youth Caucus described the dire situation indigenous young people faced, saying they were routinely discriminated against, and that history and heritage were being lost to assimilation. Native students also often dropped out of school because their needs were not being met, he added, noting that a recent study had found that North American Native and Alaskan students had a drop-out rate twice the national average. Quality education needed to be made available in their mother tongue. There needed to be integrated indigenous learning systems and knowledge, he said, stressing also that special emphasis should be placed on the training and education of teachers.

Also addressing the situation of North American youth, girls and women, a representative of the Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Association encouraged the funding of programmes to protect and promote the fundamental rights of women in Canada, and to have a national and international media campaign on the prevention of violence against women and girls. He also urged Canada to further support youth-led development and policies to impact young people at a local and international level. Young people were the leaders of tomorrow, he added, calling on the Permanent Forum to seriously consider the recommendations put forward by indigenous youth groups today.

Moved by the participation of so many young peoples' organizations, two members of the Permanent Forum suggested that the panel consider holding a special thematic discussion focusing on that group, particularly indigenous adolescents, whose plight was often overlooked. Those youth -- a demographic that reflected a disturbingly high number of suicides -- also needed education that respected their cultural identity, protection from abuse, violence and exploitation, and participation in decision-making processes relevant to their lives.

Several speakers who addressed the situation of indigenous women emphasized that the sexual violence, exclusion and discrimination they faced had serious consequences. Their opinions along with education, nutrition and well-being were not prioritized and the lack of education and access

to healthcare could lead to high rates of infant and maternal mortality and malnutrition, among other ills. They called for a focus not only for improving the situation of indigenous women, but for intensified efforts to build up the capacity of indigenous families.

Touching on related issue, a speaker, taking the floor on behalf of Na Koa Ikaikai Kalahui Hawaii, Jumma Peoples Network International and 20 other groups, said that, while United Nations peacekeepers were an important component in restoring normality after the turmoil and horrors of war, allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation of women and children continued to plague their work and had reached alarming levels at the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC). And while the United Nations had launched investigations and a host of other initiatives to address the problem, what had not been investigated were rapes of indigenous women of the Congolese pygmy population.

With all this in mind, she urged the Forum to press the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to develop a policy on indigenous peoples, with active participation and consultation with indigenous peoples. She also stressed that the Peacekeeping Department must work with indigenous women now to establish a real policy on indigenous people and involve indigenous women in the creation of culturally sensitive training and media campaigns.

The Permanent Forum will reconvene tomorrow at 11:30 a.m. Wednesday, 24 May, to continue and conclude its thematic discussions.

Thematic Discussion

The representative for Te Runanga O Te Rarawa said free, prior and informed consent was a principle well known to the New Zealand Government. It was enshrined in the Treaty of Waitangi, which obliged the Crown to protect Maori lands, estates, forests, fisheries and other treasures. Yet, the words “disappointing”, “unbalanced” and “narrow” were just some of those used by Government to describe the Special Rapporteur’s country report. To demonstrate legitimacy of its criticisms of the report, New Zealand relied on its exemplary record before the United Nations human rights treaty bodies.

However, in doing so, the Government failed to mention the finding of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that the Foreshore and Seabed Act contained discriminatory aspects against Maori. Maori had increasingly lost faith in the so-called democracy underpinning New Zealand’s “special mechanisms” and reconciliation processes, she said. The ongoing absence of free, prior and informed consent in regards to the expropriation of Maori rights and the use and control over their lands and natural resources would continue to send Maori on a downward trajectory. Te Runanga O Te Rarawa looked forward to the Permanent Forum identifying a streamlined process and methods by which implementation of its recommendations could be monitored.

Touching on another troubling issue, a speaker, taking the floor on behalf of Na Koa Ikaikai Kalahui Hawaii, Jumma Peoples Network International and 20 other groups, said that military in Bangladesh, Myanmar, India and Nepal had long employed rape and sexual violence against indigenous women and girls -- a systematic and brutal policy that targeted those women as a weapon of war, torture and subjugation against the whole community.

It was, therefore, both extremely worrying and ironic that Bangladesh, Pakistan India and Nepal -- with histories of violating the rights of indigenous people, as well as gender-based violence -- were among the five top contributors to United Nations peacekeeping missions. Those four countries made up over 44 per cent of all the world body’s peacekeeping personnel, as at April of this year. “The lucrative revenue this brings in helps to support and perpetuate the militarization on indigenous lands in Asia”, she said.

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host of other initiatives to address the problem, what had not been investigated were rapes of indigenous women of the Congolese pygmy population. With all this in mind, she urged the Forum to press the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to develop a policy on indigenous peoples, with active participation and consultation with indigenous peoples.

She also stressed that the Peacekeeping Department must work with indigenous women now to establish a real policy on indigenous people and involve indigenous women in the creation of culturally sensitive training and media. The Peacekeeping Department should also seek to hold meetings with women's groups. She also urged the United Nations to lift the diplomatic immunity of its staff accused of criminal acts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and elsewhere, opening the way for prosecution.

Among the Member States participating in the Forum as observers, Venezuela's representative said that her Government's main priority was building "inter-cultural bridges" by which it could protect and promote cultural diversity, as well as ensure political participation of indigenous peoples in the various State institutions. While much remained to be done, barriers had been broken between the State and tribal communities, particularly due to joint efforts to raise general awareness about the country's indigenous and African roots, and enhance cultural and linguistic education for the country's youth.

The representative of Norway said the President of the Sami Parliament and the Norwegian Government signed an agreement, which stated that the Sami Parliament had a right to be consulted on matters that might affect them directly. In matters where no agreement was reached between the Government Ministry and the Sami Parliament after consultations, the Parliament had a right to request consultations on other matters they considered would affect the Sami. The parties to the agreement were currently in the process of drafting detailed guidelines that would ensure the uniform implementation of the agreement.

Last year, the Norwegian Parliament adopted what was now known as the Finnmark Act. The basic principle of the Act was that the Sami, through long-term use of land and water resources, had the right of use and ownership of the territory concerned. The rights of the coastal Sami to lands and marine resources were not covered by the Act. That issue would have to be dealt with by the commission.

Making a collective statement on behalf of Eastern African peoples, one speaker said forests, rivers and lakes had been nationalized, yet some had been converted to military training grounds without the prior knowledge of the Massai community. The women continued to be raped. The people had been killed by known people or the Government, and, despite the demand for investigation, the Government had not done anything but criticize their existence. He called upon indigenous brothers and sisters to stand with them to call for investigations regarding the death of Massai people and said the Government should institute investigations. He called upon indigenous peoples to support them through international instruments,

He said organizations like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) should support the full implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Also, international committees should come together to expedite the prosecution of those who committed crimes of human trafficking and exploitation. Further, Member States should consult with indigenous peoples and make documents available in indigenous languages. Formal documents should be reflective of the groups that existed in each State. That would then begin to foster the symbiotic relationship between indigenous peoples and the State. That was crucial, in order to begin to build trust.

A representative of the Indigenous Youth Caucus said the concern of the indigenous youth should be of great concern to the Permanent Forum, because they would suffer the greatest losses. They were the bridge that linked the past to the present. History and heritage was being lost to assimilation. Without indigenous historical knowledge, they faced continued discrimination. A study done found that three out of 10 American students dropped out of high school. North American Indian rates and Alaskan students had drop-out rates twice the national average, and native students often dropped out of school because their needs were not being met. Quality education needed to be made

available in their mother tongue. There needed to be integrated indigenous learning systems and knowledge. Special emphasis should be placed on the training and education of teachers.

The representative for the World Adivasi Council said women and children faced a grave situation with regard to trafficking and sexual exploitation. They were being misused, abused sexually and sold in the international market. Some of them could not be traced and never came home. The system exploited a poor economic situation among indigenous people, and the phenomenon must be given top priority for consideration and action. A worldwide programme to combat it was needed. A worldwide, effective programme for the development and employment of women must also be promoted. That would empower humans within the regional, national and international levels.

The representative of the Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Association said that, within the colonial borders of Canada, the safety of indigenous women and girls from violence, poverty and oppression must be addressed. There were oppressive colonial forces and practices that perpetuated violence against women and girls. More of their children were being apprehended into State care, with increasing levels of incarceration, and women were being excluded from decision-making processes. Indigenous girls were being trafficked from rural to urban

centres, with the promise of easy money. When a young girl was bought and sold for sexual desire, that was exploitation. Indigenous women and girls had the right to be safe and free from violence. When a woman or girl was targeted because of gender or identity, her human rights had been violated.

He encouraged the funding of programmes to better the status of women in Canada and to have a national and international media campaign on the prevention of violence against women and girls. He also urged Canada to further support youth-led development and policies to impact young people at a local and international level. Young people were the leaders of tomorrow. He urged the Permanent Forum to take the recommendations into consideration and improve the safety conditions of indigenous women and girls.

A speaker giving a collective statement on behalf of the Assembly of First Nations said the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)'s recent report card on Child Poverty in Rich Countries, 2005, found that Canada was in the bottom third of 26 countries with a child poverty rate of 15 per cent. Poverty was an aggravating factor, which caused the placement of more than one in 10 First Nation children into the care of child welfare agencies across Canada.

Given that little or no resources were in place within First Nation communities, it was common that children with disabilities were placed within the external child welfare systems. The higher rates of socio-economic disadvantage and risk factors related to health and well-being increased the likelihood that First Nation children would be mistreated or exposed to family violence. With adequate resources, agencies could provide service to First Nation children and their families within the home. She recommended that all indigenous children and, in particular, those with disabilities, be examined through joint sustainable efforts undertaken by indigenous leaders, non-governmental organizations, nation States and the United Nations Human Rights Council.

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