



Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Second session

New York, 12 – 23 May 2003

Message from Sergio Vieira de Mello,
High Commissioner for Human Rights

Distinguished members of the Permanent Forum, representatives of States, indigenous organizations and the UN system and participants at the second session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues,

I would like to extend to you my greetings and best wishes for the second session of the Permanent Forum that begins this morning.

It will be recalled that exactly ten years ago the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights recommended that consideration be given to establishing a permanent forum on indigenous issues. The proposal was discussed in successive workshops and working groups under the aegis of the Commission on Human Rights, and held its first session with the assistance of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in May last year. The OHCHR has accompanied the Permanent Forum from its inception and played its part in its launch and subsequent follow up in 2002. We feel, therefore, strong attachments to this important new body.

When I became High Commissioner I pledged to my predecessor, Mary Robinson, my commitment to supporting the Permanent Forum until it had a secretariat team of its own. In January this year, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs took responsibility for the new body.

It is therefore a source of great satisfaction for the OHCHR that the Permanent Forum is now established with a functioning secretariat of its own and is able to focus on its core mandate: the provision of advice to the United Nations system on indigenous issues.

At its first session, the Permanent Forum received comprehensive information about the programmes of the UN system. It was provided with explanations about the working methods, political and financial constraints, and opportunities for operational activities within the different UN organizations and specialized agencies.

I am pleased that some time is being set aside early in the agenda of its second session to allow the members of the Forum to continue their dialogue with the UN system so that a fruitful working relationship can be established between the Forum, the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples, and the UN system working on indigenous issues that is realistic, practical and results-oriented.

The Permanent Forum is a unique body composed of 16 independent experts on indigenous issues who can give guidance and advice to the UN system. The strength of the Forum lies in its experience in indigenous matters, the quality of its advice and its independence.

The Forum is in a position to help UN organizations and specialized agencies become more effective in their work on indigenous peoples, by encouraging them to enhance their activities, redirecting their efforts into new areas, and working in greater cooperation one with another.

At its last session in 2002, the Forum made a number of proposals relating to the human rights of indigenous peoples. We very much welcomed these ideas and took action accordingly. My office has provided the Forum with a report on the activities undertaken in response to these recommendations. We invited members of the Permanent Forum to take part in two activities and I hope you will benefit from the first-hand account of two workshops attended by Mr Parshuram and Ms Ekundanayao.

As the Forum looks towards the future, it will be important that it makes full use of the capacity and experience of each UN organization, body, agency and mechanism and directs its proposals to the relevant parts of the UN for implementation. The Forum is here to energize the UN system not be its substitute.

In the human rights area, I have noted that there is an interest in human rights-related studies and standard-setting and I hope that members of the Forum will appreciate the WGIP is mandated to undertake these kinds of activities. I would therefore encourage you to establish links with the Chairperson-Rapporteur and members of the Working Group to see how it can assist you in this area of work.

I would also like to suggest that the Forum work closely with Mr Rodolfo Stavenhagen, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Commission on Human Rights mandates the Special Rapporteur to report to governments on the situation of human rights of indigenous people, undertake fact-finding visits to countries, and take up specific violations directly with governments.

Both the Working Group and the Special Rapporteur may be seen as filling the important human rights protection gaps that fall outside the Forum's mandate. Having said this, however, my office recognizes that there is a need for exploring how these different mechanisms can work harmoniously together and be fully complementary. For this reason, the office at the request of the Commission on Human Rights has invited the Special Rapporteur and the Chairperson-Rapporteur of the Working Group to take part in the second session in order to provide an opportunity for consultations.

The cooperation that can be developed among these mechanisms may also be useful when the ECOSOC meets in July this year to consider the Secretary-General's review of all mechanisms, procedures and

programmes within the United Nations concerning indigenous issues that is requested in the Council's resolution 2000/22.

Finally let me say some words about the Inter-agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues that was established in January 2002 with the purpose at that time of preparing for the first session of the Permanent Forum. The Inter-agency Support Group is composed of all departments, organizations, programmes and agencies of the UN system and is itself a means for improving inter-agency cooperation.

The Inter-agency Support Group met in February 2003 in Washington, hosted by the World Bank, to make preparations for the second session, and will meet again in Geneva, under the auspices of the World Intellectual Property Organization in July this year to consider how the recommendations made by the Forum at this session and approved by ECOSOC can be implemented. This group should also be seen as a useful mechanism for enhancing cooperation and efficiency and be an important partner of the Forum.

Let me conclude, by saying that my office is committed to the future of the Forum and looks forward to developing a dynamic, practical and solutions-oriented relationship with you.

Thank you.