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Patricia Cochran

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A Focus on the Arctic

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Chair
Inuit Circumpolar Council

Check Against Delivery (5)

Half Day Discussion on the Arctic Region
UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Eighth Session

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Madame Chair, indigenous leaders, and friends:

It is an honour for me to address, in my capacity as Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, the eighth session of the UN Permanent Forum, and to be asked to participate in a discussion with such an esteemed panel of experts.

This afternoon we focus on the Arctic. I thank and commend the 16 members of the Permanent Forum for their foresight last year in planning a half day discussion on the Arctic region for this year's agenda.

Madame Chair: A focus on the Arctic is not only timely because of the rapid and, in some cases, uncontrolled changes occurring in the Arctic, but also because we now know that what happens in the Arctic affects the rest of the world.

We learned much from the climate change report that you submitted to this body last year, along with former Permanent Forum Vice-Chair, Aqqaluk Lynge, as special rapporteurs. We learned that indigenous peoples globally often live in marginalized areas that are negatively affected more than most by rising sea levels in the South, which are caused by melting ice in the North. You noted in your report that the Arctic is an area of special concern.

A focus on the Arctic is important here because Arctic peoples have experiences to share with all indigenous peoples of the world. I hope that in a few minutes, through interventions from the floor, we from the Arctic will also learn more from your experiences.

A focus on the Arctic here is timely and necessary also because others – such as industry, UN member states, western academics, shipping companies and tourism operators – are eyeing indigenous lands, seas and resources.

I hope that representatives from UN member states and UN agencies listen very carefully today. I hope that they will take back to their capitals the fact that indigenous peoples in the Arctic will never allow themselves to be taken for granted and that we can count on all indigenous representatives here to support us as we face challenges at home.

Madame Chair, the Arctic is unique. For decades, we in the Arctic have witnessed the most dramatic environmental effects of industrial technologies. Inuit have weathered the onslaught of

many pollutants simply because of our geographic location. Heavy metals, mercury and other contaminants are in our air, water and food chain. The way in which UV radiation affects us in the Arctic makes our region unique. The ozone above the North Pole is thinning because of industrial activities elsewhere.

Persistent organic pollutants, or POPs, are chemicals such as DDT, PCBs and toxaphene. They are transported up to the Arctic and are trapped there in the cold. And then, because POPs attach themselves to fatty tissues, Inuit women, after eating whale muktuk and using seal oil, find themselves with concentrations of these chemicals in their breast milk that are eight times the concentrations found in nursing mothers living here in New York City.

Today we know that mercury from outside the Arctic is an escalating health problem for Inuit and the Arctic in general. Cancer and tuberculosis continue to be huge issues in the Arctic. Inuit have the highest lung cancer rates in the world, and they contract TB at rates 90 times the rates found in many urban settings further south. Life expectancies among Inuit are much lower than among other populations in the countries in which they live.

UN member states are also causing us problems from afar. Just one very recent example is the European Union's import ban on the seal skin products that many Inuit rely upon for their livelihoods. While on the one hand the EU promotes the rights of indigenous peoples to manage their own resources through its support of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, on the other hand the EU passes an import ban that denies the rights of indigenous peoples to manage their own resources. Canada supports Inuit on the seal matter but refuses to endorse the *UN Declaration*. We hope that in the future Canada and the USA will support the *UN Declaration*, as Australia recently did. We hope that Russia, which abstained on the Declaration vote, will also come out in favour of the Declaration. Having three Arctic states standing on the outside is not conducive to building constructive relationships with indigenous peoples in the Arctic.

Climate change has resulted in the unprecedented melting of the Greenland ice cap. It is causing parts of Alaskan and Canadian villages to tumble into the sea due to erosion. It is moving the foundations of our houses that were built on permafrost that is now shifting and melting. It is thinning the ice of our hunters' travel routes in Russia, Greenland and elsewhere. Climate change has brought us foreign and predatory species never seen before in our region, and it has caused other species on which we rely to vanish. Black carbon falls on our snow and ice.

What we Inuit may see as devastating, industry now sees as an opportunity. If it wasn't enough for industry and UN member states to cause us problems from afar, they are now coming north to potentially cause problems directly in our homeland. They eye quicker shipping routes. They eye resources such as oil and minerals that were previously under ice. UN member states say the navigation passages are international. Arctic states, while arguing among themselves about where the exact boundaries lie, say the Arctic is theirs.

Inuit are a pragmatic people. While we see new challenges, some daunting, we have nevertheless not thrown up our hands and walked away. And, surely, we have not let industries and states simply do what they want with our lands and seas and with us.

What have we done? Inuit from across the circumpolar Arctic met at a leaders' summit last year in response to this increasing focus on the Arctic and in response to being left out of the Arctic sovereignty debate. We agreed to take six months to draft a *Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic*, which we released last month. In it we assert our rights as an indigenous people under international law, and as an indigenous people within the four states in which we now find ourselves.

What else have we done? Last month, we invited indigenous peoples from all over the world to come to the Arctic for an Indigenous Global Summit on Climate Change. Proactively, we addressed the challenge of climate change with others from around the world.

In addition, ICC, along with the Saami Council, organized and hosted an Arctic Indigenous Languages Symposium in Norway last year. We have recommendations that are specific to the UN system and we will be passing them on to the Permanent Forum members later today, asking them to support these recommendations.

Madame Chair, we will continue to act and not hide our heads in the melting ice. We intend to call on Arctic states, indeed all UN member states, to work with us on various fronts as we move forward.

We plan to look forward, be resilient and adapt. In spite of the unique challenges I have enumerated, we will continue to be optimistic. We will, for example, work hard with UN member states to achieve an international agreement on black carbon and on mercury; and we call upon the Permanent Forum to support us on that. We will submit our report from the Global Summit on Climate Change to the UNFCCC process this year in Copenhagen, and we will expect action. We will move ahead on promoting the recommendations of the languages symposium. We will work to ensure that the rights, roles and responsibilities of Inuit, as laid out in our *Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic*, are fully recognized and accommodated in the four Arctic countries in which Inuit live. We will work with states, UN agencies and others in improving our health indices. We will work with industries to ensure that they seek our consent to their activities and that what they do is of benefit to us. We will insist that they talk to us first. We will continue to reach out to our former colonizers and to others.

While it may seem daunting, Inuit are optimistic. We will overcome.

Madame Chair, fellow indigenous peoples, thank you for letting me use this time to focus on the Arctic region and to share with you our challenges and our hopes. Thank you for supporting us. We will continue to support you.