Statement by
H.E. Mr. Bayney Karran
Representative of the Republic of Guyana
at the
Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

ON BEHALF OF THE RIO GROUP

MAY 17, 2006

Madam Chairperson,

The Rio Group\(^1\) is honoured to join the discourse on the special theme of this session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues entitled “Millennium Development Goals and Indigenous peoples: redefining the Goals.” Last year, the majority of indigenous representatives present at this Forum indicated a low level of awareness of the MDGs, it is our hope that one year later, we are now better positioned to engage in a substantive discussion on this issue.

In reality, the MDGs represent a commitment undertaken by governments of developing and developed countries to meet the needs of the world’s poor, through clearly defined, time bound goals. Member States of the Rio Group embrace the MDGs, which are based on the principles of equality and partnership, given its complementary nature to critical aspects of our national development strategies. In a region where the vast majority of States are characterized by economic and social inequalities, it is well known that indigenous peoples are more marginalized and disadvantaged than other groups, experiencing higher levels of poverty and lower levels of education and access to basic health services. Clearly the very core issues addressed by the MDGs, such as the eradication of poverty and hunger, achievement of universal primary education, the promotion of gender equality, the reduction of child mortality and the improvement of maternal health, the combat of HIV/AIDS and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and development of a global partnership, are directly related to the myriad of challenges faced by indigenous peoples.

The fact that the MDGs were borne out of an intergovernmental process in no way nullifies its potential, if implemented, to improve the quality of life of indigenous and non-indigenous people. Our focus at this point should therefore be concentrated on establishing ways and means of ensuring that indigenous people articulate their needs within the current framework of the MDGs in order to benefit more from national efforts aimed at the attainment of these goals.

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\(^1\) The Member States of the Rio Group are as follows: Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.
“The Millennium Development Goals: A Latin America and Caribbean Perspective,” a UN publication of 2005 has clearly indicated that our region is on target with respect to the attainment of many of the MDGs. The same report however noted that economic growth, unemployment, the need for official development assistance and unfavourable terms for international trade could also negatively impact the efforts of governments of the region to attain these goals. The Report of the International Expert Group Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals, Indigenous Participation and Good Governance” among its recommendations supported research “... to analyse the impact of the MDGs programme on indigenous people, including research into the impact of international, regional and bilateral trade and financial agreements; official development assistance policies and programmes; and the debt burden on indigenous peoples.” The States of the Rio Group fully support this proposed research since it is our view that the Permanent Forum should not merely highlight the shortcomings of governments, but actively engage and collaborate with them in resolving these issues. We believe that the Permanent Forum could be utilized as a platform to advocate for debt relief, favourable terms of international trade and ODA, and would serve to better position governments to invest in much needed social services, especially to indigenous peoples.

The reality is that indigenous people contribute to the development of their countries and ought to benefit equally from developmental processes. Clearly, there is need for governments and civil society organizations including indigenous representatives to increase their levels of consultation and collaboration. It is only through dialogue that both sides would be better able to understand the challenges faced by each other.

Madam Chairperson, the Rio Group is heartened by the launching of the Programme of Action of the Second International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People, which will be guided by the theme “partnership for action and dignity.” This Programme builds upon the work of the previous decade in addressing challenges faced by indigenous peoples in areas such as education, health, human rights, the environment and culture but also includes relevant standard setting activities. However, the success of the implementation of this Programme of Action is heavily dependent on the commitment of resources to the Trust Fund for the Second Decade. The Secretariat has indicated that project proposals have already been received but finance is now needed. We therefore urge countries in a position to do so, to contribute to this Fund in order to facilitate the early implementation of the Programme of Action.

Our Group is appreciative of the progress made towards the adoption of a UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by means of different efforts such as the International Workshop on the draft declaration held in Patzcuaro, Mexico, in collaboration with the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights last September and by the inter-sessional working group on the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples during its eleventh session. After more than a decade of negotiations and significant progress, the States of the Rio Group believe that every effort should be made for the early adoption of the draft declaration.

It would be remiss of our Group, Madam Chairperson, if we failed to remind of the upcoming High Level Meeting on International Migration and Development, which will be held later year. Indigenous people do encounter difficulties as migrants and as such the Permanent Forum should utilize part of this session to address this issue.

In closing, allow me Madam Chairperson to reiterate the willingness of the Member States of the Rio Group to continue working towards attaining a life of dignity for all indigenous peoples.

I thank you.