

**United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues  
Fifth Session, New York, May 15-26, 2006**

**Agenda Item: 3 Millennium Development Goals and  
Indigenous Peoples**

**STATEMENT OF THE NEPAL FEDERATION OF INDIGENOUS  
NATIONALITIES (NEFIN): DR. OM GURUNG, GENERAL  
SECRETARY**

Madam Chairperson  
Members of the Permanent Forum  
Distinguished Delegates  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I take the floor on behalf of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, the national umbrella organization representing 59 distinct indigenous peoples of Nepal. Occupying the mountains, the hills and the lowlands of Nepal, these 59 indigenous communities constitute more than 40% of Nepal's 24 million population.

In these months, Nepal's indigenous peoples are locked in a crucial battle to force the provision of ethnic autonomy in the new constitution. As the general secretary of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, I appeal to the international community to support Nepal's indigenous peoples' struggle for ethnic autonomy for traditional indigenous territories. In Nepal, such traditional territories are clearly recognized by defined ethnic and linguistic boundaries.

The indigenous peoples of Nepal, under the active leadership of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities and in partnership with the mainstream political parties, took to the street to support the recent political uprising. Under intense pressure generated by the people's power movement, the King of Nepal agreed to end 237 years of autocratic rule and to formally relinquish the sovereignty back to the people. The interim government being formed will hold a constitutional assembly election. The constitutional assembly will draft a new constitution. In the new constitution, the indigenous peoples of Nepal want a provision for recognition of ethnic autonomy for traditional indigenous territories.

For over 200 years, Nepal's autocratic rulers pursued relentlessly the policy of assimilation of indigenous peoples. They pursued a monolithic policy of "one nation, one culture, one language, and one religion." Consequently, Nepal's indigenous peoples have suffered persistent cultural discrimination. For example, the state of Nepal codified caste system to relegate indigenous peoples in a socially lower rung. Education policies imposed on indigenous peoples a national language leading to the loss of many of the 100 indigenous languages. Until 1990, Nepal's constitution did not recognize the indigenous religions practiced by millions of people.

Nepal's indigenous peoples have suffered from economic exploitation. The ancestral territories of Nepal's indigenous peoples were annexed through military forays and through legal "constructive arrangements." These "constructive arrangements" were put in place to recognize and honor the exclusive collective rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands. The state of Nepal then unilaterally violated these constructive arrangements, for example through the nationalization of forest and pasturelands, resulting in alienation of indigenous peoples' ancestral lands. Today, Nepal's indigenous peoples are poor. The Maoist communist insurgency that has currently engulfed the country was rooted in a combination of factors, including the depressing levels of poverty in, and lack of social services for, rural and remote indigenous villages. The insurgency in turn has further exacerbated the indigenous peoples' poverty.

The government of Nepal, under its Millennium Development Goals, has proposed poverty alleviation measures. Even if the measures are implemented as planned, they will not alleviate poverty among indigenous peoples. Nepal's indigenous peoples believe that poverty amongst them can be addressed in the longer term by recognizing the ethnic autonomy of traditional indigenous territories.

Madam Chair, may I take this opportunity to thank the donors for supporting the institutional strengthening activities of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, including the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the World Bank. I am also thankful to the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) for supporting our participation in the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.