



S T A T E M E N T

BY THE

**HON. PAULINE SUKHAI, MP
MINISTER OF AMERINDIAN AFFAIRS
OF THE REPUBLIC OF GUYANA**

ON THE

**IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UN DECLARATION
ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS

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Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for permitting me the floor to make an intervention on Guyana's implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

I am pleased to inform the Forum that Guyana's Constitution, laws and policies underscore the "equality of all peoples" and explicitly forbid discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, gender and religion. In order to give effect to our Constitutional provisions, five Human Rights Commissions have been established namely; the Ethnic Relation Commission, the Gender and Equality Commission, the Indigenous Peoples Commission and the Rights of the Child Commission. These Commissions offer both a constitutional framework as well as a mechanism for redress.

Mr. Chairman,

Article 149G of the Constitution of Guyana guarantees the protection of Indigenous languages, cultural heritage and way of life and force assimilation is not tolerated. The Amerindian Act of 2006 and other policy measures promote the expression and development of culture and languages and during the month of September, Amerindian Heritage Month is celebrated to build awareness of the rich culture of the first peoples of Guyana.

Further, the Government of Guyana fully respects the principle of collective rights and the revised Amerindian Act of 2006 created the legal regime for the protection and enforcement of collective rights to land and internal self-government.

Amerindian land titles are exceptional in the context of the titling of land in Guyana, in that it is collective, absolute, unconditional and forever, and this is applicable to lands traditionally occupied and used by indigenous peoples. Importantly, land claims take into account the spiritual, cultural and traditional attachment of Amerindians to the land and legally, the Government is responsible for funding land demarcation. The Mining and Forest Acts for instance respect Amerindians traditional rights to lands. In addition, the Environmental Protection Act ensures that traditional activities are not constrained. The opportunity for Amerindians to establish community protected areas within their villages is also based on the consent of the community members.

On the principle of self determination and governance, villagers democratically elect their leaders and councils to administer their affairs, are mandated to create their own village rules and community development plans this is in consonance with the national laws and as prescribes in UNDRIP Article #3 and 4.

The Government of Guyana ensures the inclusion, integration and representation of Indigenous peoples at all levels and constitutionally established mechanisms allow for decisions to be made in keeping with the principle of free, prior and informed consent. This principle is particularly evident on issues such as land rights, access to

indigenous communities, use of natural resources, the conduct of research projects and the establishment of protected areas etc. Further, national investment policies for development are consultative, all inclusive and non-discriminatory giving full effect to Articles 21 and 23 of the Declaration.

Guyana has made significant strides in fostering the economic and social development of indigenous peoples. However, these achievements have recently been challenged by the parliamentary opposition, in their vote against the financial allocation budgeted for projects and programmes. This puts at risk the erosion of achievements, and the further development of Indigenous communities. The Government denounces this position of the Parliamentary Opposition.

It would be remiss of me if I failed to mention that my country's delegation to this meeting includes not only Government representatives but the Chief of the National Toshias Council, the chairperson of the Indigenous Peoples Commission and an NGO representative from The Amerindian Action Movement of Guyana. This is a demonstration of partnership that exists between government and the indigenous peoples in Guyana.

Mr. Chairman,

We recognize the evolving challenges of creating opportunities and further mainstreaming indigenous development into our national development agenda. Nevertheless, we also recognize that our successes to date are largely due to our national laws and policies, as well as implementation of the Declaration, which have all positively impacted the human rights, social, cultural and economic well being of the indigenous peoples. We are of the firm view that our model for Amerindian development offers good practices and lessons, especially as it relates to partnerships between governments and indigenous peoples.

We stand in solidarity with indigenous peoples internationally and urge that opportunities be utilized to engage in dialogue with government and other stakeholders for the advancement of the wellbeing of indigenous peoples.

I thank you.