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Human Rights and Implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: social, economic and cultural rights

Madame Chair.

Dr. Rodrigo Yepes described Indigenous Peoples' enjoyment of their inherent, ancestral and Indigenous rights as "precarious". This is true. It applies both in developing and developed States.

Nonetheless I am encouraged by the growing acceptance and focus on the place and rights of Indigenous peoples. We are however mindful of the continued and considerable gaps between commitments and actions on implementation at all levels. The idea of "rights ritualism" belies the credibility of commitments made.

There are many considered presentations on:

- Indigenous lands, territories and resource rights;
- the requirement for Indigenous peoples' free, prior and informed consent for proposed lands and resource development;
- of many treaties, agreements and other constructive agreements which are constantly and continually violated;
- Indigenous peoples who are directly and seriously impacted by conflict and who become refugees in other lands;
- and for redress where lands and resources were wrongly taken now and in the colonial periods of many States.

In this intervention I will focus on a very specific area, that of Indigenous languages within the context of economic, social and cultural rights.

One of the most fundamental of all rights, for all peoples, is that of languages. For Indigenous peoples these are their indigenous languages handed down from generation to generation. Indigenous languages tie generations together; connects the spiritual and secular worlds within the Indigenous world of beliefs and spirituality; and ties Indigenous peoples, through their world views, to their respective lands and territories which provides for them and supports their traditional Indigenous ways of life.

Indigenous peoples, Indigenous lands and territories, Indigenous spirituality and world views and, cultural traditions and practices are inextricably tied together through Indigenous languages.

There is however a very serious problem, a crisis. Each year many Indigenous languages become extinct. The UN Secretary General at the last session of this Forum stated that one Indigenous language dies every week. There are many and varied reasons for this. In some States these languages are in a precarious situation because of deliberate actions of governments. For example I spoke of Indian residential and boarding schools in Canada and the US whose public policy objective was "to kill the Indian in the child". State and church applied this policy to each and every Indigenous child; its intergenerational ramifications are deep. Indigenous languages were treated with outright hostility and now many are at best considered with indifference and provided marginal State support. Dr. Yepes describes this as a "vicious cycle".

It is therefore critical for the United Nations, its agencies, funds and programmes and for UN member States, within the context of economic, social and cultural rights commitments in international treaties, Declarations, outcome documents and other such international instruments, to consider the precarious situation of Indigenous languages as a key international public policy priority issue requiring urgent and proactive steps to redress the continuing and devastating loss of Indigenous mother tongues. There is an important place for a "virtuous cycle" as stated by Dr. Yepes; but this will require genuine commitment at all levels and concrete action applied systemically to ensure the retention, survival and continued use Indigenous languages. This is a necessity for the dignity of all humanity

Thank you.