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United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues Seventh Session

New York, 21 April to 2 May 2008

Item 3: Special Theme: "Climate change, biocultural diversity and livelihoods: the stewardship role of indigenous peoples and new challenges"

Statement by the Arctic Caucus – Inuit Circumpolar Council and the Saami Council

Presented by Patricia Cochran, Chair, Inuit Circumpolar Council

Thank you Madame Chair,

This consensus statement comes from the Saami Council and the Inuit Circumpolar Council, or ICC. The Saami Council represents the indigenous peoples of Arctic Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of the Russian Federation. ICC represents the Inuit from all of Greenland, Arctic Canada, Alaska, and Chukotka in the Russian Federation.

The Saami and Inuit have worked together closely, and in cooperation with other indigenous peoples organizations from all corners of the world for nearly three decades at UN meetings. Sometimes this was inside and often this was outside the halls of the United Nations. Here at the Permanent Forum, Madame Chair, we are on the inside – and we have both the UN member states and the tireless work of all indigenous peoples to thank for it.

We commend the UN Permanent Forum members for having dedicated a special session to the matter of climate change. Saami and Inuit of the Arctic hope that by putting this matter in front of UN member states, UN agencies, and indigenous peoples that are here today will not only highlight the need to address climate change in an urgent manner, but also to recognize that indigenous peoples, being among the most marginalized on the planet, are most affected by the effects of climate change. We also hope that the Arctic will be highlighted by the UN as a special focal point, as it is there that the effects of climate change have been felt the earliest and are – at the moment – the most visible and most severe.

We will promote strongly, Madame Chair, that the discussion here today will lead to action as recommendations are "sent up" the UN hierarchy and reviewed by ECOSOC. We are confident that action will ensue, as we the members of the Arctic Caucus will continually remind UN member states, and the UN agencies they have established not to drop this matter. Indigenous peoples themselves are already sharing amongst each other how they are coping, adapting, and addressing the climate change challenge. The members of the Arctic caucus are offering knowledge also to the work of the UN agencies as they move ahead. We have some concrete proposals, Madame Chair, that we believe can be beneficial to all sides. Both our traditional knowledge and other knowledge systems are invaluable tools that we offer the members of the United Nations. We hope that they will agree to use them.

We also commend, Madame Chair, the UN Secretary-General for having hosted a high-level climate change summit last September, where he invited heads of state and members of civil society, including an indigenous representative to speak with each other. By hosting such a summit, the Secretary-General is calling upon all member states

and UN agencies to place the matter of climate change as a matter of first priority. I would like to remind you that the high level summit opened with a short video, and that the first images projected were that of the Arctic, the melting icecap of Greenland, and the thinning ice. The Nobel prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change highlights the fact that the Arctic is warming faster than any other place on this planet. And I would like to remind all those that are listening that we, the Saami and the Inuit, live in that Arctic, Madame Chair.

While the Arctic Caucus does not want to look back at the closed-door environment that existed in the numerous previous Conferences of the Parties of the UNFCCC, including the process that led to Kyoto, and would rather look forward optimistically, we must collectively learn from our mistakes. It is clear that in future COPs, the plight of indigenous peoples will not be addressed if they are not at the table and not involved in the decision-making. We call upon the United Nations to open the door to indigenous peoples in all matters affecting climate change.

While we speak to this agenda item from an Arctic perspective, we do so in solidarity with other indigenous peoples. The Saami and Inuit are highlighting the specific challenges of the Arctic because they are real and they hurt us. But we also do so because we know that we are all connected. What we see more visibly in the Arctic today, indigenous peoples on small islands in the Pacific and in the mountains and rain forests of South America and in the fertile soil and deserts of Africa will experience tomorrow. Already today, we see the effects of climate change everywhere.

While we must attack the causes of climate change vigorously, Madame Chair, let us be cautious in how we plan mitigation strategies. Indigenous peoples have experienced not only the effects of climate change most dramatically, but they have borne the brunt of misguided mitigation measures that are mostly done without consultation and often without any thought. How else does one explain, Madame Chair, the numerous examples of hydro power plants flooding our lands, sprawling windmill farms interfering with our reindeer-herding areas, geothermal power plants displacing our sacred sites, and the biofuel crisis we have heard so much about? There is even talk of urgently going back to nuclear power plants that are often placed on or near our lands and territories, and this, in turn, will mean uranium mining near our settlements. Let us talk before we act, Madame Chair.

We congratulate you, Madame Chair, and your colleague and mine, Aqqaluk Lyngé, for the report you jointly wrote as *special rapporteurs*. While we support all the recommendations you made therein, today we would like to focus on three very important recommendations for this Forum to consider. They are:

1. Each UN agency that works on climate change matters should develop a special Arctic focal point for climate change;
2. The UNFCCC should develop a seat at the negotiating table specifically dedicated to indigenous peoples, in which we would have direct access to decision-makers and where we would be able to offer our knowledge in constructive ways;

3. All UN member states and agencies should include in their climate change strategies a screening mechanism that evaluates the impacts of mitigation measures themselves on indigenous peoples.

Thank you, Madame Chair.