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Statement

**On Agenda Item 3
Goal 2 of the Millennium Development Goals:
Achievement of Universal Primary Education**

By

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on Indigenous Issues**

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From the outset, allow me, Madam Chairperson, to congratulate you and the other members of the Permanent Forum on your election, and in some instances, re-election to this body. This Forum continues to focus global attention on the issues affecting indigenous peoples and contributes to the incremental understanding of the challenges they face in pursuit of development, respect for their identity and the full enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Madam Chairperson,

Poverty eradication is one of the principal goals of Guyana's development policy and the Government of Guyana is fully committed to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, particularly those relating to the eradication of poverty and hunger. Poverty has had a disproportionate impact on Amerindians, as the indigenous peoples of my country are termed, and efforts are ongoing to address this situation in the context of our national Poverty Reduction Strategy. In 2004, for instance, the President's Youth Choice Initiative, funded with resources from the Guyana Lottery Committee, was launched in Region 9. Under this initiative, G\$49 million has been made available for income generating projects. The recipients have so far opted to engage in agriculture, cattle rearing, craft production and other economic activities.

In spite of the efforts, levels of poverty remain unacceptably high. Key constraints include a substantial foreign debt burden and declining terms of trade. These factors limit government expenditure on social services and development activities. In addition, the dispersed settlement pattern, difficult terrain and high cost of administering projects in interior locations of Guyana also mitigate against poverty eradication among Amerindians. Clearly, more still needs to be done. We would therefore urge that the Permanent Forum join in the advocacy for debt relief, the establishment of a level playing field for developing countries in global trade and increased overseas development assistance. It is only through addressing such issues that additional resources could be made available to finance development programmes, including those relating to education, improved health care and housing for indigenous peoples.

In a multi-racial society such as ours, striving to achieve economic and social development, social cohesion based on the principle of equality of all citizens, is imperative. Education is viewed as vital to the attainment of individual aspirations as well as national development and like all other citizens of Guyana, Amerindians have a right to quality education, which is provided free of cost from kindergarten to the secondary school levels. While efforts are ongoing to provide greater access to education, matters concerning content are also being reviewed. The introduction at the primary level of bilingual education in five of the nine native languages spoken by Amerindians in Guyana and its contribution to the affirmation of identity cannot be over emphasized. The

provision of free school uniforms and textbooks to Amerindian children in Regions 1, 7, 8 and 9, and in the case of Region 9 the launching of a nutrition programme by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Beacon Foundation, a local NGO, have positively impacted school retention rates and attendance levels.

In order to alleviate the shortage of qualified teachers in Amerindian communities, distance learning teacher training programmes have been piloted in some regions. Scholarships are also made available to Amerindians to undertake studies at the tertiary level particularly in the technical and natural sciences.

The appointment of a Minister of Amerindian Affairs whose primary responsibility is to ensure the welfare and development of indigenous communities, coupled with the annual celebration of Amerindian Heritage Month in September, have both had positive effects on national development and the greater understanding of the history and culture of the first peoples of Guyana. The Amerindian Act which governs issues such as land rights, entry of persons into Amerindian communities and the powers of indigenous leaders has been revised to reflect current realities through a process of broad-based consultations, including with Amerindian communities. This Act would soon be tabled for consideration by the National Assembly.

In closing, permit me to note that through the work of the Permanent Forum we have been able to identify the areas of concern to indigenous people. The task before us now is to assist in the formulation and implementation of strategies to overcome these challenges. The Permanent Forum could play a role in advocating for an international environment that is conducive to the full attainment of development goals. We therefore urge for greater dialogue and collaboration at all levels as well as the development of genuine partnerships in our quest to enhance the welfare of indigenous peoples.

I thank you.