

Statement by Louise Fréchette,
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In Message to Indigenous Forum, Deputy Secretary-General Stresses Need for Concrete Plan to Improve Living Standard, Respect for Human Rights

NEW YORK, 16 May (UN Headquarters) -- Following is the text of remarks, as delivered today by Deputy Secretary-General Louise Fréchette to the opening of the fourth session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues:

It is a pleasure to join you for the fourth session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Let me offer a special welcome to the many indigenous women and men who have joined us from all parts of the world.

As you know, last year the General Assembly proclaimed the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People. This session of the Forum is an opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the first decade, and to equip ourselves for the challenges ahead.

In the last 10 years, the relationship between indigenous peoples and the United Nations has come a long way. This Forum itself, a new United Nations body of high calibre and with a broad mandate, is drawing welcome attention to neglected issues and is playing a catalytic role in forging partnerships between indigenous peoples, Governments and the UN system. The appointment of a Special Rapporteur for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people has strengthened the protection mechanisms available to indigenous peoples. And inter-agency cooperation has improved, with the UN Development Group and Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues taking important steps to better integrate indigenous concerns and issues into our activities and policy-making.

Yet, grave challenges persist, as was noted in the recent report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who was the Coordinator of the first International Decade. In many countries, indigenous people continue to be among the poorest and the most marginalized. Like other vulnerable people, indigenous communities are often disproportionately victimized by the effects of armed conflict, adding a destructive and deadly burden to already difficult struggles. And at the level of international law, Member States have still not adopted the declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, despite many, many years of negotiation and advocacy.

So there is much to do. There is a need for a concrete plan of action, drawn up with the participation of indigenous peoples, that would point the way towards measurably improved standards of living and greater respect for human rights. I urge indigenous peoples and the international community to take up this challenge.

The efforts of indigenous women bear special mention here today. Indigenous women continue to show tremendous courage and persistence in guiding and supporting their communities. They have also mobilized at the international level, participating very actively in this Forum and contributing to the general work of the United Nations for the advancement of women. Earlier this year, as the Commission on the Status of Women conducted its 10-year review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, indigenous women were there in

force -- participating in panel discussions, speaking to the media, and ultimately, successfully advocating for the adoption of a resolution on indigenous women, marking a historic first for the Commission.

Implementation of agreed commitments remains inadequate. But we have reached a point at which the voices of indigenous women are being heard more widely than ever before, from the Andes to the Amazon and the forests of Central Africa, from the plains of the United States to the deserts of Australia, and from the lands of the Arctic to the hills of the Philippines. Governments, the intergovernmental system and civil society must listen more closely to what those voices are saying.

It is entirely appropriate that your Forum this year will focus on indigenous peoples and the Millennium Development Goals. Each of those eight Goals are, of course, of direct concern to indigenous peoples, whether we are talking about improving maternal health, ensuring access to primary education or guarding against the loss of land and other natural resources.

Moreover, as you know, world leaders will gather in September for a summit meeting to review progress towards the goals and, more generally, implementation of the entire Millennium Declaration. Your Forum can contribute to that review by assessing both progress and obstacles through the prism of your experience. It is essential that indigenous peoples not be forgotten, discriminated against or remain marginalized in efforts to achieve the goals. I urge you to make constructive proposals that will help Member States transform the Goals into indigenous realities.

This is a year when change is high on the agenda at the United Nations. Indigenous peoples must be part of that process, both as contributors to, and beneficiaries of, the revitalization of the international system towards which we are striving. The Secretary-General has put before the Member States an agenda of decisions for the September Summit - bold yet achievable proposals which would, if adopted, improve our chances of realizing our long-held goals of peace, development and human rights. His report, "In Larger Freedom", stresses the interconnectedness of every woman, man and child across the globe. In that very spirit, the United Nations will continue to be your partner in your quest for dignity, and I trust you will be ours in bringing about a change of direction in our world. Please accept my best wishes for success at this year's session of this important and inspiring Forum.

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