



Amerindian
Peoples Association

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**Statement to the 10th Session
of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**

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My name is Tony James and I am privileged to be here as Vice-President of the Amerindian Peoples Association in Guyana. I would like to start by congratulating Mr. Bertie Xavier on his appointment to the Permanent Forum. Bertie Xavier is a Makushi leader and I am Wapichana, but we are brothers. We were born of the same land and of the same waters.

Today the waters that are essential for the survival of all nine Indigenous peoples in Guyana are at risk. They are at risk from the increasing commercialization of our mineral, hydrocarbon and forest resources; and they are at risk as realization grows of the value of our lands to the low carbon economy and climate change mitigation.

In the interior of Guyana, an internationally supported Low Carbon Develop Strategy and projects under REDD+ are paving the way for massive investments in hydro electric generation that could flood parts of our territories and change the flows of the rivers that sustain us. Large-scale agriculture, which is often much more water intensive than traditional farming, is similarly being promoted under the LCDS, even as many of our communities are experiencing more frequent droughts as a result of climate change. Yet when APA representatives from 66 Amerindian villages came together earlier this month to discuss these issues, not one said they had been adequately consulted on the LCDS and REDD+. While much is being foretold about possible benefits, questions about risks have remained largely unanswered.

At the same time, the continuing growth of mining and mineral, oil and gas exploration under the LCDS is a source of deep concern for many of the people I represent. Concessions now cover much of our ancestral territories and have even been issued over the limited lands to which we hold title, without our consent and often without our

knowledge. The uncontrolled and un-enforced use of mercury in small and medium-scale mining is taking a toll on both the health of our waters and the health of our people; and we know first hand the dangers of cyanide use in large-scale mining. In 1995 a tailings dam rupture at the Omai Gold Mine released over 3 million tons of toxic waste into the Omai and Essequibo Rivers. We know less about the risks posed by new uranium projects; but with severely limited official capacity to monitor extractive activities in Guyana, especially at the current pace of growth, I fear it may only be a matter of time before the Omai disaster is repeated.

These present and impending risks to our waters, lands and peoples should leave no doubt as to the urgent need for Indigenous rights to be fully respected and protected - above all our right to give or withhold our free, prior and informed consent to any activity that will affect the territories we have traditionally used and occupied.

In 2007 the Government of Guyana signed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and by doing so made a commitment to protect our rights to self-determination and free, prior and informed consent. The Constitution of Guyana further guarantees the right of our people to protect our way of life and entrenches the responsibility of the state to "protect the environment, for the benefit of present and future generations."

Most countries have made similar commitments, at least on paper, yet with few exceptions they are not being fully respected. To assist both Indigenous Peoples and states to make these promises realities, I ask members of the Permanent Forum and agencies of the United Nations to consider the following recommendations as a matter of priority.

1. Work with states to ensure prompt legal recognition of the rights of Indigenous Peoples to own, manage and control our ancestral territories, in accordance with international law;
2. Assist states to revise national legislation to fully incorporate Indigenous rights and strengthen the capacities of states and communities alike to monitor the implementation of those rights and seek redress when violations occur;
3. Ensure that every Indigenous child in every Indigenous community has a copy of the Declaration in their own language and work with Indigenous communities to promote full understanding of these rights;
4. Work with Indigenous Peoples to make sure that the true value of their resources is known, as a requirement for equitability benefit sharing;
5. Encourage all agencies of the United Nations and states to support the alternative development strategies of Indigenous Peoples as a way to reduce

dependence on large-scale development projects and the risks they carry for Indigenous resources, lands and waters;

6. Ensure that UN agencies, including specialized agencies like the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, uphold Indigenous Rights and international best practice standards in any activities they support;
7. Investigate fully the possible impacts of REDD+ and other low carbon/green economy strategies on the right of Indigenous Peoples;
8. Investigate claims by states, UN agencies and industry of having achieved free, prior and informed consent in order to ensure that the spirit of the Declaration is being upheld; and
9. Work with Indigenous communities as rightsholders, to institutionalise own guidelines and protocols on free, prior and informed consent.