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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

REMARKS TO THE OPENING OF THE PERMANENT FORUM  
ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES  
New York, 16 May 2011

Distinguished members of the Permanent Forum,  
Excellencies,  
Indigenous elders,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here. I am happy to open this tenth session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

A special welcome to all the indigenous representatives from around the world. You have traveled long distances ... physically but also in the struggle to achieve your rights.

Welcome also to the new members of the Forum. I look forward to working closely with you.

This is the Forum's tenth anniversary.

Ten years of fighting against decades of marginalization.

Ten years of uniting different cultures to reach shared goals.

Ten years of pushing for indigenous rights.

The road has been tough, but the rewards are real.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples finally has the consensus it deserves.

Now we need to make the Declaration's principles a reality.

To those who do not grasp the Declaration's importance, I say: protecting and promoting the rights of indigenous peoples benefits us all.

We see examples around the world.

In Peru, indigenous communities are responding to climate change by re-introducing native varieties of potatoes. They have support from a United Nations-

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backed fund benefiting poor farmers. Now they are helping conserve the earth's biodiversity.

We know that indigenous peoples have a close spiritual relationship with nature. Now we have to make the connection between their knowledge – your knowledge – and our world.

Indigenous peoples have been living in a “green economy” for centuries. When economists today look for new ways to achieve sustainable development, they should look at old practices in indigenous communities.

Ancient indigenous traditions can help overcome modern problems.

The goal is not to appropriate your knowledge ... to extract it or exploit it ... but to respect indigenous peoples and help preserve their traditions.

There is an indigenous saying that, “When an elder dies, it is like a light burning out.”

This is a beautiful expression of respect for the wisdom of age.

But it could also be a warning. We could just as easily say that, “When an indigenous custom dies, it is like a light burning out.”

If that is true, our world is growing darker.

Today, one indigenous language dies every two weeks.

Indigenous cultures are threatened with extinction.

Millions of indigenous peoples continue to lose their lands ... their rights ... and their resources. They make up one-third of the world's one billion rural poor. And they are among the most vulnerable and marginalized of any group.

Indigenous women ... who are the custodians of so much rich heritage ... often suffer the most.

We do not have enough studies of the problems ... but the studies we do have show appalling gaps.

Indigenous peoples do not live as long as others. They suffer higher rates of diseases like diabetes and tuberculosis. Their children are less likely to survive past the age of five. Their communities are less likely to thrive.

This Forum can play a dynamic role in changing this deplorable situation and helping indigenous peoples around the world achieve the self-determination they deserve.

Your success can build momentum toward the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples planned for 2014. You can identify ways to bring to life the principles enshrined in the Declaration.

And you can shape other important events on the international agenda.

Two decades ago in Rio, indigenous peoples were active at the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development. Maybe some of you were there. We need you now even more with the Rio+20 Conference coming up next year.

From the forests to the oceans ... from the mountains to the deserts ... around our world you are guardians of nature. We need you to help influence the decisions we make today on energy and the environment ... decisions which will affect generations to come.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Earlier this year in Guatemala, I met with Rigoberta Menchu. I remember when she won the Nobel Prize in 1992. Just before they made the announcement, people kept asking her, "What if you win? What if you lose?" Here was her answer. She said, "With the Nobel Prize, there are no losers or winners. There is a chance to hear about the struggle of people who are oppressed, a chance to be heard, and we hope that this chance never ends."

We must end the oppression, and we must ensure that indigenous peoples are always heard. Raise your voices here at this Forum and beyond. I will urge the world to listen.

Thank you.