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**High-level event to mark the
10th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**

Remarks by

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Mr. President,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Distinguished delegates,

Thank you for inviting me to this 10th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

International law and institutions have traditionally not been welcoming to indigenous peoples. Starting in the 1920s, the efforts of indigenous leaders from Canada and New Zealand to raise the plight of the peoples at the League of Nations were rejected. And for most of the history of our own organisation, indigenous representatives - being neither Member States nor NGOs - repeatedly fell between the cracks.

But they did not give up. With persistence, commitment, and integrity, they gradually succeeded in claiming their space within human rights debates at the United Nations. And, once at the table, they embarked, together with experts and Member States, on drawing up principles that would mark a path to improved protection of their rights.

The Declaration took more than 20 years to craft, but the spirit of partnership and inclusivity demonstrated in its formulation ensured an outcome that would properly reflect the aspirations of indigenous peoples.

But the struggle is far from over. Although the Declaration was approved 10 years ago, many of the obstacles that led to its enactment are still present today. Endorsement of its fine principles, alas, does not equal implementation.

So once again, the indigenous movement – with its diverse voices, including those of indigenous women, youth, and persons with disabilities – is rising to meet the challenge of making implementation of the Declaration a reality.

Indigenous peoples throughout the world are invoking the principles of the Declaration as a shared tool for action, often joining forces across countries and regions, as we have seen with the “water protectors” at Standing Rock in North Dakota, in the engagement of indigenous women from Canada to Guatemala, in the new coalitions of indigenous persons with disabilities speaking up for their rights from Nepal to Mexico. They are insisting that indigenous peoples’ free, prior, and informed consent must be sought; insisting that their treaty rights are honored; insisting that violence against indigenous women is combatted.

We are also seeing how national courts in countries like Belize and Malaysia, regional bodies such as the African Commission on Human Rights, and UN treaty bodies, are increasingly invoking the standards of the Declaration, demonstrating that while the Declaration is not a binding treaty, it has clear normative significance.

In a number of countries, domestic legislation and policies also draw heavily on the Declaration.

And yet, the full potential of the Declaration has not been sufficiently heeded.

Extractive industries continue to despoil indigenous lands. Historic rights, cultures and livelihoods are too often trampled by politicians and businesspeople, who instead of seeing indigenous peoples as a vital element in diversity and tradition, brutally treat them as mere obstacles to their own personal profit-making.

At the same time, many of those who work to uphold the principles of the Declaration pay a heavy price. As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has stressed, “activists for the rights of indigenous peoples often function in a landscape of violence, threats and poverty so harsh that it thwarts their ability to act. They need and deserve our protection and support.”

According to NGO Frontline Defenders, out of 281 human rights defenders killed in 25 countries in 2016, almost half were defending their land, environment and indigenous rights. This is happening despite the repeated calls for protection of indigenous human rights defenders by the Special Rapporteur and others. It is not the lack of recommendations that hampers implementation of the Declaration – the Human Rights Council’s Universal Period Review alone resulted in 991 recommendations on indigenous peoples during its first two cycles. Rather, it is the unwillingness to implement such recommendations that.

Therefore, our office – the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights – both in the field and at headquarters, supports improved follow-up to recommendations on indigenous peoples’ rights, and this has yielded concrete results such as improved consultations mechanisms and demarcation of indigenous peoples’ lands.

UN human rights mechanisms provide detailed, country-specific recommendations to improve implementation of indigenous peoples’ rights. I would like to mention three areas of action that we believe are essential:

- First, to ensure that indigenous peoples have the resources and support to build their capacity, so as to be able to claim their rights and interact on equal footing with the authorities, the private sector and human rights mechanisms, free from harassment and reprisals. Tools to amplify indigenous voices at the international level, such as the UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples and the current General Assembly initiative to increase indigenous participation in UN, deserve our active support.

- Second, it is important that all those whose decisions impact on indigenous peoples and their lands – from State authorities to business enterprises and international financial institutions – are familiar with the standards of the Declaration and understand that they are not a mere wish-list but commitments that do actually need to be respected. There are excellent training tools on the Declaration, developed by UN, indigenous organizations, NHRIs and others. But we should also aim to include indigenous peoples' rights in the curricula of business schools and law schools, and of training of officials.
- Third, we need detailed, well-resourced national action plans to translate the standards of the Declaration into concrete measures, as envisaged in the Outcome of the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples. Our office, together with our UN and indigenous partners, is developing guidance on how to build national action plans that are genuinely inclusive and grounded in human rights, and we urge all of you here to join this effort.

These are all areas where OHCHR and other UN actors are already forging new partnerships with indigenous peoples and states, in line with the new UN system-wide action plan on indigenous peoples.

But a great deal more is needed – from all of us – if we are to move beyond celebrating the anniversary of the Declaration to celebrate its actual implementation.

Thank you.