

OPENING STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN, MR. OLE HENRIK MAGGA

The First Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

New York, May 13, 2002

*They come to me  
and show books  
Law books  
that they have written themselves  
This is the law and it applies to you too  
See here*

*But I do not see brother  
I do not see sister  
I cannot  
I say nothing  
I only show them the tundra*

*I see our mountains  
the places we live  
and hear my heart beat  
all this is my home  
and I carry it  
within me  
in my heart*

*I can hear it  
when I close my eyes  
I can hear it*

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*And I can hear it  
even when I open my eyes*

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*But they keep coming  
asking where is your home  
they come with papers  
and say  
this belongs to nobody  
this is government land*

*everything belongs to the State  
They bring out dingy fat books  
and say  
this is the law  
it applies to you*

*What shall I say sister  
what shall I say brother*

*You know brother  
you understand sister*

*/Nils-Aslak Valkeapää*

Dear indigenous brothers and sisters, representatives of the UN agencies, governmental representatives and non-governmental organizations. On behalf of my fellow colleagues and myself, I welcome you all to this the first, historic, session of the Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues. [First in the Saami language, then in English]. My opening words were parts of a poem written by the Saami poet, musician, painter and actor Nils-Aslak Valkeapää who died last year. He devoted all his life to the work for Saami and indigenous culture and the rights of our peoples.

I am extremely happy to see so many prominent people gathered here at this historical event. For the first time in the United Nations history, indigenous peoples and governments meet here on a truly equal basis. In particular, I am happy to see so many indigenous sisters and brothers present, and I extend my warmest thanks from the bottom of my heart to all of you who have fought so hard and so long to make this Forum come true. At the same time, we must never forget that there are immensely more of our peoples that for many reasons do not have the opportunity to participate in this meeting here today. Let us remember this all from the beginning.

I would like to thank my colleague members of the Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues for the confidence that you have shown me by electing me as the chairperson for the Permanent Forum for the first year. In particular, I would like to thank you, Antonio Jacanamijoy, for nominating me for this position. This election is by far the highest honour I have ever experienced in my life, and I promise to use all my abilities to make the first year of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues as successful as possible. To carry out our task, however, we need all the sixteen members this Forum will have. I am very impressed by the contributions that you have already made to our work, and am confident that with all your collective experience, skills and talents, we have an excellent basis for meeting the many challenges we will face in establishing the Permanent Forum as truly permanent. During the first week we have been working together, the Forum members have already demonstrated their will and ability to work as a team with no dividing lines between members nominated by indigenous organizations and governments.

I also want to thank the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for their preparations of this meeting and UNITAR for organizing a one-week seminar for the Forum members prior to this session. In that context, I extend our deepest gratitude to the governments of Canada and Germany for providing the resources that made the seminar possible.

The Permanent Forum will not be able to accomplish anything by itself. We depend on the full and undivided support from states, the UN bodies and agencies as well as from international organizations. We will need your political support as well as your financial backing. Therefore, I again want to welcome the representatives of the UN agencies to this meeting, and we are all looking forward to hear from you as the meeting proceeds. But foremost, the Permanent Forum will need the support and backing from all the world's indigenous peoples. We will need to be in constant communication with all of you, from the organizations represented at this meeting to the grassroots level. Only through the indigenous peoples themselves can the Permanent Forum receive input and information about how we can make at least some of our dreams come true.

And, certainly, there are a number of concerns to address. Even though the international community has paid more attention to indigenous peoples during the last couple of years, many indigenous peoples remain among the poorest and most marginalized groups in the world. This, the Permanent Forum must address. The violence in different forms must be stopped. Food must be provided for the hungry. Many of our people die now when we meet here in New York. We must all stand together in putting an end to the ongoing, and in many cases blatant, discrimination of indigenous peoples. The Permanent Forum must put an end to the deforestation, desertification and polluting of indigenous territories. It must work for the termination of harmful military activities and excessive mining and logging on indigenous land. It must stop the construction of power plants in indigenous waters against their will. Humanity is at stake. And our peoples must be recognized for whom they are and want to be. All this we will address from the very beginning.

We start a historical process here today. Since indigenous peoples and governments meet here on an equal basis, the Permanent Forum symbolizes a new form of co-operation between the two. Our work must be done with the respect to our peoples and their experiences and aspirations generated through centuries and milleniae. It must be carried out with respect to the UN system and other international organizations and in particular to the ECOSOC who has established the Forum. And we will pursue our goals in respect to the governments and we will seek co-operations and invite to partnership in all our work. I am looking forward to working with you all during the first, exciting, years of the Permanent Forum.