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Statement by Ms. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz

Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations

I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for giving me this opportunity to address the third session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations.

As you know, the Fund was established by General Assembly resolution, 40/131 of 13 December 1985 with the purpose of assisting representatives of indigenous peoples' organizations and communities to participate in the deliberations of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations. Ever since, the General Assembly, recognizing the needs of indigenous peoples, expanded the mandate of the Fund twice in order to also assist representatives of indigenous communities and organizations to participate in the deliberations of the Working Group on the Draft UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People as well to attend, as observers, the sessions of this Forum.

At its 17th session in March 2004, the Board of Trustees considered about 550 admissible applications received within the established deadline; 246 of which were applications to attend this session. In accordance with the criteria for selection and the money available in the Fund, the Board recommended to the Secretary-General to approve the allocation of 46 travel grants from the different indigenous regions of the world, thus increasing the amount of grants allocated to the Permanent Forum. Let me extend a warm welcome to them.

The General Assembly in its resolution 58/158 appealed to all Governments and organizations to consider contributing to the Fund with a substantial increase in the level of contributions. Similarly, the Commission of Human Rights in its resolution 2004/58 and the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in its resolution 2003/29, appealed to all Governments, organizations, including non-governmental organizations and indigenous groups and individuals in a position to do so to contribute to the Fund. I would also like to take this opportunity to appeal to all regular and potential donors to generously contribute to the Fund. Taking into consideration the number of requests received in 2004 to attend three sessions, the Fund would need an amount of US\$800,000 before the next session of the Board of Trustees in 2005.

Dear Mr. Chairman, at its 17th session, the members of the Board underlined the fundamental importance of the Fund and Board as an independent UN body which over the years, has ensured the participation of indigenous peoples in international processes relevant to them. In fact, during the last ten years the Fund has been able to assist over 870 indigenous representatives. Many of these are now recognized leaders in their own communities and organizations. The Board is also very grateful for the support provided by the Permanent Forum to its activities and wishes to enhance the relationship between the two UN organs in the coming years.

The fund has become a model which is now being emulated by other intergovernmental bodies who are wanting to set up their own funds. Last year, under the reform program of the UN Secretary General, the existence of the fund was threatened. It was observed that there are more than 200 voluntary funds in the UN system and several of these are virtually dead. Thus, the need to rationalize the management of these funds became a major concern for the system. The members of the Board of Trustees asserted that our fund is very much alive and has played and continues to play a role in allowing participation of indigenous peoples in the UN. For many indigenous peoples who live in the most repressive and oppressive situations, their participation in intergovernmental processes and spaces can make a difference in ensuring their survival as individuals and as peoples. Up to now we get letters from those we supported saying that had it not been for their participation in one of the WGIP sessions, their issues would not have had any chance of being heard or addressed.

We can say with confidence that we managed this fund with a high degree of accountability and transparency. In a way, the Board of Trustees which is composed of indigenous experts for many years already, is another proof that indigenous peoples are capable of managing funds entrusted to them. If this was not the case, the General Assembly would not have expressed its full support to the Fund and underlined its importance by enlarging its mandate three times since its inception. We are proud to report that the fund has survived and in fact, it is one of the voluntary funds which can be cited as a good practice in managing and using funds. Of course, our effectivity is also very much determined by the efficiency of the Secretariat of the Fund and we are very grateful to the members of the Secretariat for this.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to close by saying that there is no doubt that the fund has contributed in fulfilling some of the goals of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples. Therefore, we, the Board of Trustees, would like to add our full support to the recommendation that a Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, under the coordination of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, be adopted and declared. This is to ensure that a human rights approach to indigenous issues be maintained and strengthened.

I thank you very much Mr. Chairman.