

Public statement

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UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Human rights organizations condemn efforts to block vital human rights instrument

International human rights organizations are outraged and dismayed by the decision of the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly to defer adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The United Nations has missed a historic opportunity to fill a critical gap in international human rights protection. The Indigenous caucus has characterized this action as sending the message that the “UN affirms Indigenous Peoples are not equal to all other Peoples”.

The Declaration has been under development within the UN for more than twenty years. A non-binding human rights instrument, the Declaration encourages states and Indigenous peoples to work together to address the basic needs of Indigenous individuals and communities, including greater control over their own lives and secure access to the lands and natural resources essential to their daily survival and practice of their cultures.

On June 29, the Declaration was adopted by a vote of the overwhelming majority of the members of the UN Human Rights Council, the pre-eminent human rights body of the United Nations.

The debate in the Third Committee was marred by unfounded and alarmist claims about the potential impact of the Declaration. Statements by Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA that the Declaration would jeopardize the rights and interests of other sectors of society willfully ignored the fact that the Declaration can only be interpreted in relation to the full range of existing human rights protections and state obligations. This is explicitly acknowledged in the Declaration itself.

It was clear that domestic political agendas took precedence over the promotion and protection of human rights. The unfortunate and unnecessary decision to not adopt the Declaration undermines the work of the Human Rights Council, the very body that the General Assembly has tasked to lead on the promotion of human rights.

The motion to defer further debate was brought forward by African states most of whom had been absent from the extensive negotiations that had taken place over the previous two decades. Their motion, which was passed by the Third Committee on Tuesday, November 28, by a vote of 82 to 67, calls for the decision to be deferred until the end of the current session of the General Assembly in September 2007 so that further consultations can take place. The motion is widely viewed as an effort to weaken or undermine key provisions of the Declaration as adopted by the Human Rights Council.

Around the world, Indigenous peoples are among the most marginalized and vulnerable. As a statement of common principles and aspirations, the adoption of the Declaration would mark only the first step toward addressing the deep-rooted prejudice and discrimination that has led to widespread human rights violations against Indigenous peoples worldwide.

We recognize the efforts of the many states that have worked in support of the Declaration. We urge other states to respect the decision of the Human Rights Council last June and to commit themselves to the adoption of the Declaration at the earliest opportunity.

Amnesty International

Canadian Friends Service Committee (Quakers)

International Service for Human Rights

International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)

Kairos: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives

Netherlands Centre for Indigenous Peoples (NCIV)

Rights & Democracy