

Remarks by Kimberly Teehee, White House Senior Policy Advisor for Native American Affairs, at the Tenth Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Kimberly Teehee, White House Senior Policy Advisor for Native American Affairs

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AS DELIVERED

Good afternoon. I am Kimberly Teehee, Senior Policy Advisor for Native American Affairs to President Barack Obama. I am also a member of the Cherokee Nation.

I want to thank the Permanent Forum for inviting the United States to make a statement at this year's opening session. We very much appreciate the invitation and the opportunity it presents for increased engagement of Member States with the Forum.

I am also pleased – from a personal perspective – to be able to participate again this year. I had the pleasure of addressing you last April during the Half-Day Discussion on North America. I hope this is the beginning of a pattern – and that there will be many more opportunities for fruitful exchanges.

Finally, I would like to congratulate the new members of the Forum. I have had the opportunity to meet many of you (old and new members) and have been impressed by the commitment and thoughtfulness you bring to the work of the Forum. I wish you a very successful tenure.

The United States was pleased to receive the invitation to address the Forum on its Tenth Anniversary because we see the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues as an important venue for exploring how those who are committed to addressing the many challenges faced by indigenous peoples around the globe can learn from each other and move forward to address those challenges.

The Permanent Forum has made many significant contributions both by raising the international profile of indigenous issues generally and by doing important work on many specific issues.

Recognizing the important role of the UN Permanent Forum, the United States chose last year's session as the venue in which to announce that the United States would review its position on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Ambassador Rice explained that the United States would conduct a formal review of the U.S. position on the Declaration, and we did. During the process, we held multiple consultation sessions with tribal leaders and other meetings with interested groups and individuals. We also received over 3,000 written submissions. All of that information was reviewed and considered by an interagency team. It took us awhile, but we think that inclusive process was important.

As I suspect you know, the result of that review was President Obama's announcement on December 16, 2010, at the White House Tribal Nations Conference, that the United States lends its support to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

As President Obama stated: "The aspirations [the Declaration] affirms -- including the respect for the institutions and rich cultures of Native peoples -- are one[s] we must always seek to fulfill."

While the decision to support the UN Declaration was a very important one and the result of a lengthy process of consultation and review, we don't see it as an end in itself. That is because – again quoting President Obama – "What matters far more than words -- what matters far more than any resolution or declaration – are actions to match those words."

For that reason, I invite you to review the Announcement document that was released to accompany President Obama's statement of support for the Declaration. That document not only explains the U.S. position on the Declaration, it also highlights some of the many U.S. initiatives on Native American issues and shows how U.S. support for the Declaration complements the Obama Administration's ongoing efforts to improve the relationship between the U.S. Government and tribal governments and to address the many historic inequities suffered by Native Americans.

I know that much of Wednesday afternoon will be devoted to a discussion of the UN Declaration. Therefore, I won't address it further now.

Rather, because a number of the items on this year's agenda for the Permanent Forum are issues on which the United States has worked closely with tribal leaders, I would like to take a few moments to describe a few of those efforts. I do so for two reasons: First, I hope that our experiences may offer useful insights for other countries and indigenous peoples facing similar challenges. Second, I would like to hear from others what has worked in their countries, and I hope my sharing of U.S. efforts can begin that conversation.

Before I get to specific U.S. programs and initiatives, however, I would like one general comment. President Obama is committed to strengthening the unique government-to-government relationship between the U.S. Government and the 565 federally recognized Indian tribes. This unique relationship is not only set forth in U.S. law; it also reflects the enormous contributions that tribes have made and continue to make to the cultural, social, and political traditions of our country.

Despite those contributions, Native Americans often suffered greatly due to misguided government policies. I spoke at length about that history at the Permanent Forum last year, so I won't do so again today. However, I will note that our experience has taught us that tribal self-determination – the ability of tribal governments to determine how to build and sustain their own communities -- is necessary for successful and prospering communities.

It is with that lesson in mind that we approach the issues covered by the specific items on the Permanent Forum's agenda this year.

The global economic downturn has affected communities all across the globe. But often indigenous peoples have been hit particularly hard. This is certainly true in the United States. However, the U.S. Government has taken many steps to promote economic and social development in Native American communities in both the short- and the long-terms.

Perhaps the most important long-term investment for any country, people, or individual is in education. Tribal leaders have stressed in particular the importance of greater tribal control over the education of Native American students. The Administration has proposed changes to U.S. law to enhance the role of tribes in the education of their youth and to give them greater flexibility in the use of federal funds to meet the unique needs of Native American students. We have also accelerated the rebuilding of schools on tribal lands and are working to improve the programs available at tribal colleges.

Another crucial component of economic and social development is the health of our people. Yet health care is often insufficient in indigenous communities.

President Obama took a major step towards addressing health care gaps (for both indigenous and non-indigenous communities in the United States) by signing into law last year landmark legislation known as the "Affordable Care Act". Significantly, the legislation provides permanent authorization for the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, which modernizes and updates health care services available to those who use the Indian Health Service, which includes most American Indians and Alaska Natives. We expect it to make a huge difference in the lives and health of Native Americans. Internationally, the United States is supporting upcoming high-level meetings on Non-communicable Diseases and HIV/AIDs and will be focusing on the impacts of both issues on indigenous peoples.

Our First Lady, Michelle Obama, has also made a particular effort to involve Native American youth in her "Let's Move!" initiative to address child obesity. She has, for example, recruited Native American athletes like American football stars Sam Bradford, a member of the Cherokee Nation, and Levi Horn, a member of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, to encourage Indian kids to adopt healthy lifestyles.

One public health challenge on which we are focusing particularly intensely is the unacceptably

high rates of suicide by Native American youth. We know that this tragedy is not unique to North America. The Administration has held listening sessions with tribal leaders across the country and would be very interested in sharing what we know about the problem and learning from others what they have found to be successful in addressing this issue.

As we have been told repeatedly by tribal leaders, no community can prosper, economically or socially, unless its basic needs for public safety are met. It is for this reason that the United States has taken a number of steps to strengthen tribal police and judicial systems. More flexible funding has been key. But perhaps more fundamental was the July 2010 signing by President Obama of the Tribal Law and Order Act (TLOA). This comprehensive bill is aimed at improving public safety on tribal lands, including unacceptably high rates of violence against women. The statute gives tribes greater authority to prosecute crimes and increases federal accountability for public safety in tribal communities.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs at the U.S. Department of the Interior has also launched an intense community policing pilot program on four reservations experiencing high crime rates. We are already seeing promising results and the Bureau hopes to expand the program in the near future.

Tribal leaders who have met with President Obama have stressed to him the importance of investment in infrastructure. President Obama agrees and we have supported many economic development initiatives focused on the needs of Native Americans. One exciting initiative was the announcement in December by Energy Secretary Chu of the establishment in the Department of Energy of an Office of Indian Energy Policy and Programs, led by a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. The office is charged with directing and implementing energy planning and programs that assist tribes with energy development and electrification of Indian lands and homes. It has done extensive outreach to Indian tribes regarding energy issues on tribal lands and earlier this month held a Department of Energy Tribal Summit that brought together over 350 participants, including tribal leaders and high-ranking cabinet officials, to interact directly on energy development and related issues.

The U.S. Government is also working with tribal leaders to bring their communities into the 21st Century by equipping them with high speed access to the Internet. Both the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Commerce have programs to do so and have awarded loans and grants worth over \$1-1/2 billion for projects to benefit tribal areas.

These infrastructure investments go hand-in-hand with a wide range of projects to create jobs in Indian communities and prepare Native Americans to fill them.

I hope that these few examples that I have given today help demonstrate the extent of U.S. initiatives to address the needs of Native American communities across our country. However, we recognize that a lot more needs to be done, both in the United States and in many other countries as well.

That is why we are here. No country and no indigenous people has all the answers. That includes the United States.

We believe that a very important role the Permanent Forum can play is to help indigenous peoples and States – including the United States – to identify what works to combat problems that many of us share in common – like unemployment in Native lands or youth suicide – and then to replicate those successful practices at home.

By combining knowledge in this way and working collaboratively to build a consensus on what needs to be done, we can help ensure a better future for all of our peoples.

What better goal could we have for the second decade of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues?

Thank you.