

AGENDA ITEM 4 a: Review of developments ; General debate

STATEMENT BY THE OBSERVER DELEGATION OF FINLAND

Mr. Eero J. Aarnio

Mr. Chairman,

Because it is the first time I take the floor, I would like to congratulate you upon your election as Chairman-Rapporteur of this Working Group. I feel confident that under your experienced chairmanship the Working Group will once again have a successful session.

In the course of years, the Sámi have firmly consolidated their constitutional status as an indigenous people in Finland. According to the Constitution they have in their native region, the Sámi Homeland, a cultural autonomy. Every fourth year the Sámi elect members to their representative body, the Sámi Parliament. Next time these elections will be held in September 2003. The right of the Sámi to maintain and develop their own language and culture has been guaranteed in the Constitution, as well as their right to use their own Sámi language before the authorities. The Parliamentary Committees shall reserve the representatives of the Sámi an opportunity to be heard whenever consideration is being given to legislative proposals or other matters specifically involving the Sámi. All other authorities shall negotiate with the Sámi Parliament whenever administrative matters specifically affecting the Sámi are being considered.

However there are some issues on which improvements should be made. Efforts to solve the remaining problems connecting them should be made in due course.

The Sámi Language Act, which has been in force for more than ten years, has not always been implemented satisfactorily. The Act is now undergoing a reform on the basis of a proposal made by the Sámi Parliament. The new Act should eliminate the deficiencies observed in the implementation of the Act. The Government intends to bring the Act into force in the beginning of next year.

The issue of land rights of the Sámi has not yet been resolved, and thus obstacles to the ratification of the ILO Convention no 169 still remain. However, the Ministry of Justice has actively sought to examine the question of land ownership in terms of property law and to prepare legislation on the administration of land whereby the right of the Sámi to use the land would be confirmed. The objective of these attempts made by the Ministry of Justice has been a step by step approach towards a situation which could be mutually acceptable. However, the Sámi Parliament has strongly criticised the proposed legislative projects, and, so far, no major progress has been made in the issue.

In any case, the goal of the Government is to ratify the ILO Convention as soon as possible, but an unconditionally precondition for that is naturally that the Sámi Parliament fully accepts this step to be taken.

Thank you Mr. Chairman