PFII May 2014 session: U.S. Statement
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Intergovernmental Affairs and Public Engagement
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Thank you, Madam Chair. Before commenting on the UN’s activities relating to indigenous peoples, I would like to highlight notable developments within the United States.

The U.S. government is committed to improving the situation of U.S. tribal communities. To that end, we continue to strengthen our government-to-government political relationship with U.S. federally recognized tribes when formulating our broader policy objectives. The White House Tribal Nations Conference – hosted by the President – is now an established annual event, the fifth conference occurring in November 2013. Cabinet secretaries, senior U.S. officials, and tribal leaders gathered to have an open, informed, and constructive discussion in the U.S. Capitol. To make the meeting as useful as possible, we organized breakout sessions on priority topics that tribal leaders wanted discussed: self-determination and self-governance, healthcare, economic and infrastructure development, education, protecting natural and cultural resources, climate change, natural disaster mitigation, and law enforcement and public safety. We invite you to read the 2013 White House Tribal Nations Conference Progress Report, which is available online and which documents the many tribal-related policies and programs we have in place.

The November 2013 Tribal Nations Conference was the first of these annual meetings where tribal governments were able to speak directly with the gathered
members of the White House Native American Affairs Council, which was established by the President in a June 2013 Executive Order. The Council consists of the heads of U.S. government departments, agencies, and offices and meets three times a year, allowing for improved high-level information exchange and coordination among Federal agencies. Its five focus areas – tribal economies, health and nutrition, education for Native American youth, law enforcement and public safety in tribal communities, and natural resource protection and the environment, including climate change – are among the major concerns of indigenous peoples in the United States.

Turning from our domestic actions to the multilateral arena, we are focused on preparations for the September World Conference on Indigenous Peoples. The World Conference is an unprecedented, milestone event – the first time that senior UN and member state representatives will gather together with indigenous representatives at a UN high-level meeting to consider recommendations that indigenous peoples have presented over the years to the Permanent Forum, Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and other UN meetings devoted to human rights, development, environment, and conservation issues.

We understand that the preparatory process remains in flux. We support the efforts by the President of the General Assembly to reach agreement on the arrangements for the World Conference, including for the negotiation of its outcome document, that are acceptable to all member states and take into account the views of indigenous peoples. We encourage efforts to find a solution that will allow planning to proceed. To achieve a successful World Conference, indigenous peoples must be able to participate meaningfully in the preparatory process and the Conference itself. While there are differing views on what constitutes meaningful participation, we think the arrangements ultimately settled upon must be acceptable
to the broader indigenous community, as it wouldn’t be productive to proceed with a World Conference on Indigenous Peoples if the main stakeholders were dissatisfied. The United States supports holding the informal interactive hearing called for by the UN General Assembly Resolution as soon as is practicable and structuring it to allow for an inclusive exchange of views. Elected and traditional indigenous leaders, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, academics, and others should all be given the opportunity to offer their observations.

We strongly support the call for a concise, action-oriented outcome document. Conciseness is important because in our experience, documents of this nature that are lengthy and lacking in focus will be diluted to secure consensus. The risk of not gaining consensus also increases with a document that attempts to do too much. The document should be action-oriented and contain steps that member states and the UN system can take in the near future to promote the rights of indigenous peoples and to tangibly improve the situations of indigenous peoples and conditions in their communities. Those steps may include additional work by UN bodies on issues of concern to indigenous peoples, and may also include best practices of member states on those topics. Lastly, we strongly believe that the outcome document needs to be a consensus document in order for the World Conference to meet its potential. We will continue to work with all stakeholders to arrive at a consensus document.

To inform how the United States will approach the World Conference, we are engaging regularly with U.S. indigenous representatives. We held a scoping session in March and formal State Department-hosted U.S. consultations on May 9 with both representatives of U.S. federally recognized tribes and with other U.S. indigenous peoples, groups, and organizations. As we indicated at the May 9
consultations, we are working on setting up other opportunities to consult with U.S. indigenous peoples before the World Conference, possibly in July or August.

Thank you for your attention. The U.S. delegation looks forward to working with member states and indigenous partners during this Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues session.