

UN COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS  
Sub-commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities  
Working Group on Indigenous Populations  
Seventeenth Session  
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Agenda Item 5  
Principle Theme : Indigenous Peoples and their Relationship to the Land

Statement by Helen Corbett, General Secretary Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organizations

Madam Chair.

The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is an international human rights movement to protect and promote indigenous rights. UNPO is created and operated by indigenous peoples.

As its General Secretary, my office provides a legitimate, international forum for indigenous issues. We offer critically needed services of advocacy, mediation, public affairs to guarantee fundamental freedoms for all.

Our founding principles are inextricably connected with the relationship to this land agenda item. It is therefore important to address our principles of respect for the environment, religious freedoms and nonviolence.

Land rights or Earth rights is the heart of the third generation of human rights. UNPO believes that civil, political, economic, social, cultural and collective rights are inseparable. We note the emergence of the collective third generation of human rights features the right to environment. The legal, political and moral concept of the collective rights indicates a growing trend among international law such as the Banjul Charter founding the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Our membership for all world continents recognizes and implements actions that contribute to this global understanding of basic human rights.

The indigenous worldview of the environment is beyond a parcel of land, a resource for material wealth and a means of production. As the UNPO members note, the people and the land are one. Earth is our mother. Land is identity and the heart of indigenous culture.

Life revolves around land. Land is to be preserved, cherished and worshipped. That is why the right to environment and land as well as religious freedoms are intertwined. The political consciousness of indigenous peoples is connected as the issue of land weaves together the basic essentials of living and spirituality.

As a Hawaiian once stated concerning the indigenous relationship with land, 'Next to shooting indigenous peoples, the surest way to kill us is to separate us from our part of the Earth.' It is very important that we discuss the holistic relationship indigenous peoples share with the land.

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The total disregard for indigenous peoples culture and livelihood is illustrated with daily decisionmaking from the corporate board rooms to the government halls of power. However, UNPO members continue to struggle for our self-determination through nonviolent strategies. Our members are committed to the principle of nonviolence on a spiritual and political level to ensure that justice is reached for all.

From the Chittagong Hill Tracts campaign for their ancestral lands against the claims of the nation-state as well as the Naga and Bougainville struggles, they have all realized the futility and the negative cycle of violence. Therefore all have adopted nonviolent strategies to regain the sacred space of their homeland. Other UNPO members have always maintained a nonviolent philosophy such as the Ogoni in Nigeria and Aboriginals in Australia.

UNPO offers an opportunity as well as a guide for indigenous peoples fighting for their land. The nonviolent revolution can be a positive tool for social change and indigenous rights. In the long term perspective, more indigenous peoples will regain control of their land and the policies and practices just as nation states of former UNPO members and current UN members such as Belau, Estonia and other Baltic states are able to be positive contributors to the international family of nations to protect the environment as well as to promote peace.

From the Papal Bulls issued in the 15th century to the Australian Bull stated today, there is a lack of total comprehension of indigenous worldview and respect for basic human rights of indigenous peoples.

From the terra nullius to certainty, the policy and practice is constant annihilation and subjugation of indigenous culture. While the words and phrases have changed, the intent to deprive indigenous peoples of their fundamental right of self-determination recognized in the International Bill of Rights

As our late vice president Ken Saro Wiwa, 'The environment is man's first right.' The actions of multinational corporations and the nation state point out the claims Saro-Wiwa noted before his execution by the Nigerian military, 'An ecological war is highly lethal...It is omnicidal in its effect.'

In conclusion, we would strongly suggest that the following documents be the primary foundation for such studies in land. Kari-Oca, Whitehorse and the Draft Declaration are rooted in indigenous wisdom and written by indigenous peoples. UNPO strongly encourages that any study being forwarded to the Subcommission reflect the principles of these historic document enshrining indigenous rights.