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DURING THE SIXTH SESSION OF THE PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES
UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK, 23 MAY 2004

(Please check against delivery)

Thank you, Mr. Chairman,

Fiji is grateful to be able to participate in this year's discussion of this important issue particularly at this time as we celebrate the commencement of the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People. We agree with the Madame Louise Fréchette that this session of the Forum is an opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the first decade and to equip ourselves for the challenges ahead.

My delegation also acknowledges and commends the work currently being performed by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and its Secretariat. The setting up of this body, Mr. Chairman, is visible evidence of a concrete achievement, and we wish the Forum the very best as it continues to perform its mandate.

Mr. Chairman,

We also acknowledge and extend our appreciation on the work of the Special Rapporteur of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous People and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Their reports are valuable sources of information which have solidified publicly and in a multilateral sense the cruelty and inequity most indigenous people have experienced and been left to grieve privately.

My delegation commends the call for governments to take urgent actions to guaranteeing that indigenous groups have free and equal access to the administration of justice. We also welcome the recognition that land, territory and access to natural resources remains

central to observing the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people and that they also have full enjoyment of civil, political, economical and cultural rights.

The Special Rapporteur's observations and concerns over the often vulnerable situation of millions of indigenous women all over the world and his call that the lives and dignity of indigenous children to be protected is supported as a matter of urgency. We also would add that the fate of these groups is more at risk not only because they are vulnerable but that they constitute the silent majority whose voices are hardly heard in the public arena. They should be allowed access to mechanisms that can speak loudly of their plights and in addition, surrogates, who can speak genuinely on their behalf, must come forward and provide the voice that they lack.

Mr. Chairman,

We all have noted that, despite the high expectations 10 years ago, the achievement of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People can only be summarized as modest. My delegation is encouraged that the concerns and aspirations of indigenous people have at least been recognized globally by the achievement of such modesty.

Fiji welcomes and fully supports calls for a concrete plan of action, drawn up with the participation of indigenous peoples that would point the way towards improved standards of living and for greater respect for human rights and personal dignity.

My delegation notes with concern the current difficulties regarding the adoption of the draft UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We hope that the call by the UN Commission on Human Rights urging all parties involved in negotiations to do their utmost to fulfill the mandate of the Working Group and to present for adoption as soon as practicable a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People .

Many Member States and indigenous peoples had expected that consensus could be found on indigenous peoples' rights to determine their own futures; to enjoy their lands and resources; to maintain and develop their traditions and cultures; and to fully participate in the political, economic and social life of their countries. As this has not been the case, we hope that the lack of progress on the Declaration will not retard progressing initiatives in other areas of interest to indigenous peoples or limit the possible elaboration of a policy for indigenous peoples' development that might serve as a framework for the work of the United Nations system globally.

Mr. Chairman,

As we journey into the second decade, demands are growing for new approaches that would reinvigorate the discussions and ensure full participation of all indigenous people.

For us in Fiji, as a small island nation, we take pride in our culture, customs, and traditions. They give us our identity and oneness as an indigenous community. While we acknowledge the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other international instruments in the promotion of Human Rights, we also recognize that they are also primarily concerned with the rights of individuals.

We see a United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as being vitally important for international recognition and acceptance of our right to self-determination and, indeed, to our very survival as ethnically and culturally distinct peoples. That is not to say, Mr. Chairman that we are unconcerned nor deaf to the cry of other communities whose members are fellow citizens with equal rights and responsibilities in our various nations.

Mr. Chairman,

Fiji has continually highlighted the belief that a more rounded and comprehensive approach to indigenous rights should be given the correct elevation and placing in the current political and social discourse. Group and collective indigenous rights are an important consideration for indigenous communities in Fiji and our neighbours.

We therefore, like to see the equal recognition of the two concepts of individual and collective rights embodied into the framework of international and national policies. Our Constitution already gives legal acknowledgement to indigenous rights in Fiji. It is now a question of applying this within the scope of the constitution and international conventions to ensure that the rights and aspirations of the indigenous community are mainstreamed into and be part and parcel of the Fiji developmental agenda.

In conclusion, Fiji is now treading the path to bridging a divided and polarized society by addressing the central issue of unity through understanding based on the principles of tolerance, equity, and a one Fiji for all its citizens irrespective of religious beliefs, ethnic entities and in an environment where we pray that our future generations, to paraphrase Dr Martin Luther King, junior, "*can live side by side in peace, harmony and judged not by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character*".

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.