

**First Session of The United Nations Permanent Forum For Indigenous Issues
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**Statement by Mrs. Mary Simat
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Mr. Chairperson, dear brothers and sisters of the Indigenous communities of the world, let me begin by saying that we have more similarities than there are differences. Our problems are the same, our fundamental goals and objectives are the same. We are birds of the same feather who must fly together. We have been marginalised, discriminated and segregated against as communities. We have been relegated to the borders of society, indeed to the periphery, for the last hundred years. Together, we have been able to emerge from the shadows of oppression and domination. All "indicators" show that we are still at the bottom of the economic, social and political ladder. We have been denied educational facilities and adequate health care facilities. Such infrastructure is almost non-existent. Our areas are ecologically fragile and are degraded. They are prone to drought and famine. We have recognized the basis of our historical plight. We have been squeezed to cold corners with no opportunities. The fact that we are denied education means that we are "trapped". We are consigned to social and economic limbo. The colonialists made sure that we were stuck in perpetual ignorance and poverty. The socio-economical landscape, as far as indigenous peoples are concerned, has never been level; it has been tilted away from our favor.

Since the advent of the British and German imperial regimes in the last quarter of the 19th century we have gone through a series of historical events which facilitated our disempowerment as a people. Our struggle for survival has been long and winding, considering the obstacles and impediments that have been put in our way. We have faced the loss of our lands through illegal acquisition and forceful relocations. Kenya, for example, has about eight separate land laws which have been enacted with a colonial flavour. They favor the buyer and the grabber. These laws legitimize fraud and oppression. The land of the Maasai people for, example, has been stolen through coercion, intimidation and threats. The most discouraging truth is that the dominant communities have adopted these colonial laws to legitimize their occupation of the lands of the indigenous people by the dominant communities. These are some of the predicaments that affect indigenous peoples.

Many states in Africa always ask, "who is an Indigenous person? Are we all not Indigenous?" Indigenous Peoples are those who, for no fault of their own, have been oppressed and disposed by forces that are beyond their control. The loss of land to the invading colonizers is the crux of our identity and is at the root of our dispossession and marginalisation. When people lose their land, which is a basis of their survival, they become paupers and slaves in their own lands. Their culture is destroyed and so is their economy.

The Indigenous Peoples have been blamed for shunning away development. This is blaming the victim. The Permanent Forum shines a light in the tunnel. We hope that the Permanent Forum will liaise with the grassroots organizations to find both means and ways of making our governments listen to us; recognize us and support us. We demand that our governments start a process of affirmative action. Such affirmative action should be a process with specific development programs to help and uplift vulnerable groups—children, the poor, the women and all indigenous peoples.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.