

Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues
Commission Indépendante sur les Questions Humanitaires Internationales

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Statement made by

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Secretary General, ICIHI

at the opening session of

the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations

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VERBATIM

Allow me first to add to the eloquent words of Judge Lachs my own congratulations on your re-election. In you, the indigenous peoples have an active and committed champion of their cause.

I speak on behalf of the Co-Chairmen of the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues who deeply regret their inability to be personally present. In particular, I wish to welcome, on their behalf the distinguished indigenous representatives who have travelled long distances from all corners of the world to speak for their communities and share with us their concerns and aspirations.

Your Working Group provides the unique, truly international forum where the colossal problems which indigenous peoples continue to face can be freely discussed. You serve as a beacon of hope for millions of our fellow human beings who look to your Group to promote, at global level, their protection and well-being. In establishing this Working Group, the United Nations have truly fulfilled an important part of their humanitarian mandate. Here one is reminded more than elsewhere of the opening words of the UN Charter : "We, the peoples of the United Nations ..."

The Commission decided soon after its establishment to include indigenous peoples among the priority subjects to be examined by it. It was not our purpose or role to speak for indigenous peoples, who can well speak for themselves; but rather to amplify and to project that voice to a broader public, to policy-makers globally, to corporate executives, and others whose actions adversely affect the lives of indigenous peoples.

We expect our report which has just been presented to you by Mr. Lachs to be published in many languages, including indigenous languages. It makes concrete recommendations which reflect the aspirations of indigenous peoples. These will be included also in the final report of the Commission which will be made available to the United Nations' General Assembly at its next session in the context of the agenda item relating to the promotion of a "new international humanitarian order".

The Report opens with an apt quote from Aldous Huxley: "That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all lessons that history has to teach". The continuing ethnocide and, in many cases, genocide perpetrated against indigenous peoples bears out tragically the veracity of the gloomy assertion of Huxley.

As we survey the social and environmental results of industrial development and militarisation, we realise that we have urgent practical lessons to learn from societies which have succeeded in managing a sustainable environment for millenia. The custodial attitude towards the land and all life, and the respect for inter-generational rights, held by indigenous peoples are values which must be adopted by all humanity if it is to survive and thrive.

Indigenous communities and values are under severe attack, usually in the name of so-called progress. Testimonies of indigenous representatives in past meetings of this Working Group have indicated that their traditional territories are increasingly subjected to incursions. The exploitation of natural resources to fuel industry has spurred a global search for untapped reserves. Once thought of as barren wastelands of little economic value, the unexploited territories of indigenous

peoples have been identified as areas of abundant timber, minerals, petroleum and water. Increasingly, forests are being cleared, earth mined, and waterways dammed, rendering indigenous lands uninhabitable and forcing the occupants to move out. In addition, indigenous peoples' land are opened in many countries to settlement of landless peasants. This has been happening for five centuries and continues today. Indigenous peoples are also victims of military activities and defense strategies in a number of areas. Likewise, their cultures, languages and values are demeaned by the dominant societies.

What is to be gained in the achievement of justice by indigenous peoples will benefit all humankind and all life forms. Madame Chairperson as your compatriot Aristotle said some 2500 years ago: "We become just by performing just acts".

Allow me to draw your attention to the last chapter of the report which contains detailed recommendations for action at the national and international level.

Briefly, the report urges governments to recognise and promote respect for the populations, territories and institutions of indigenous peoples; to guarantee them rights to their traditional territories and natural resources; to combat discrimination against them, and to educate the general public by revising national histories and texts, taking into account the views of the indigenous population. Governments are urged to increase funding for social services to the indigenous.

In the field of development, banks and transnational corporations are urged to consult effectively with indigenous peoples before they initiate projects in or near their territories. Codes of conduct should be developed with the full participation of the indigenous communities.

At the international level, the report calls upon the International Labour Organisation to ensure that its 1989 deadline to revise its Indigenous Populations Convention is met, and that the revision incorporates the recommendations it has received from indigenous representatives and other experts.

As for your Working Group, Madame Chairperson, we recommend that the meeting time and resources at your disposal be substantially increased, and that the Group should meet from time to time in regions of the world inhabited by indigenous communities. The international agencies in the United Nations system are encouraged to put indigenous peoples' issues on their agendas, and where appropriate, to recruit indigenous professionals for staff positions. Effective mechanisms and monitoring procedures must be established to ensure the protection of indigenous peoples territories, lives and cultures.

Let me conclude by recalling the words of the indigenous leader, Phillip Deere:

"If the whole world understood the law of peace and respect, it is my firm belief that we would be a lot better off. This was the natural law of our people. No other law can replace it".

We wish you well in your deliberations during this week and success in your future undertakings. To the representatives of the indigenous people, we wish to say in tribute to their resilience and courage: "You are not alone in your struggle or indeed your quest for justice".

Thank you.