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UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations
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**Item 6 - Consideration of a permanent forum
for indigenous peoples**

Statement

by

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Vice-president

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Madam Chairperson,

The Saami Council makes the following comments under this agenda item pertaining to the consideration of a permanent forum for indigenous peoples within the United Nations system.

In its resolution 50/157 of 21 December 1995, the General Assembly reiterates the establishment of a permanent forum for indigenous people to be one of the main objectives of the Decade. We welcome this commitment of the General Assembly, and expect to see more concrete results on this issue after the fifty-first session of the General Assembly.

In this resolution, the General Assembly also recommends that the Secretary-General undertake a review of the existing mechanisms, procedures and programmes within the United Nations concerning indigenous peoples. We are informed that the Secretary-General, in consultation with specialized agencies, Governments and indigenous peoples, is conducting the review and will report to the coming session of the General Assembly.

The Saami Council does not wish to anticipate the review of the Secretary-General. However, we would like to share some of our thoughts with all of you, as a means of contributing to the ongoing review.

We believe that the review will clearly demonstrate the absence of coherent mechanisms and procedures concerning indigenous peoples within the United Nations system. In our opinion the only way in which the United Nations can enhance its ability to fulfill its obligations, under its own Charter, towards indigenous peoples, is to establish a permanent body which will have the necessary mandate and resources to meet these obligations.

Some governments insist on drawing attention to the concept of "indigenous peoples", and advocate the need for a clear definition of this concept before we proceed towards the establishment of the permanent forum. We reiterate what we have said on numerous occasions: a definition of "indigenous peoples" cannot, and must not, be a prerequisite to the establishment of the permanent forum.

This question, concerning the concept of "indigenous peoples", can only be solved within the framework of the permanent forum. Therefore, any further discussion on this issue, if at all, should await the establishment of this forum where indigenous peoples are represented on an equal footing with other peoples.

Madam Chairperson,

Allow me to elaborate on questions such as the name, mandate, level within the UN, and composition of a permanent forum.

The Forum, which could be entitled the *United Nations Commission on the Status of Indigenous Peoples*, should be established as a subsidiary body of the Economic and Social Council.

It should prepare recommendations and reports to the ECOSOC on promoting indigenous peoples rights including in cultural, political, economic, civil, social, medical, environmental and educational fields. The permanent forum should also have the mandate to make recommendations to the Economic and Social Council on urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the fields of indigenous rights and to develop proposals for the implementation of these recommendations.

The permanent forum should also prepare international instruments and recommendations on indigenous questions and supervise the application of such instruments. It should be the principal body of the UN for the development of substantive policy guidance with regard to the advancement of indigenous rights. It is also important that the forum have the mandate to consider non-confidential as well as confidential communications on the status of indigenous rights.

The mandat of such a forum must include the following four functions: (1) monitoring, (2) policy development, (3) coordination and (4) programming.

The forum should consist of an equal number of members from UN Member States and indigenous peoples on the basis of equal geographical distribution. Furthermore, we find it necessary to emphasize that indigenous peoples should be allowed to participate in its deliberations regardless of consultative status with the Economic and Social Council.

In conclusion, we emphasize that it is also crucial that specialized agencies play an active part in the forums deliberations, and that they report to the forum on their activities of special interest to indigenous peoples.

Thank you for attention.