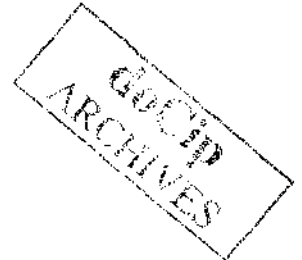


not divided!

Agenda Item 4d: Human Rights
Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Third session
May 2004



JOINT STATEMENT

BY

CENTRE FOR ORGANISATION RESEARCH AND EDUCATION (CORE) MANIPUR

SUPPORTED BY

COMMUNITY ACTION AND RESEARCH FOR DEVELOPMENT (CARD), LAMKANG

WOMEN'S UNION, AND ZELIANGRONG WOMEN'S UNION (ZWL) OF MANIPUR,

INDIA

Roy Laifungbam

Respected Chairman, Indigenous Sisters and Brothers, and Friends

Warm greetings to all of you from the Indigenous Peoples of Manipur in the North Eastern region of India!

First of all, it is an *important* fact to bring to your attention that the tiny state of Manipur on the Indo-Burma border of India has been a theatre of internal armed conflicts for more than four decades that has pitted indigenous peoples against each other as well as indigenous peoples' organisations against the security forces of India.

The impacts of this long drawn out and unresolved war has had many complex and intractable consequences for all the indigenous peoples of Manipur. We are pleased that that the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has focused its expert attention this year on the issues of indigenous women because it is *the* women and girls of Manipur that have been made to bear the brunt of this conflict and its consequences.

I need not dwell upon the particularities of this conflict but I would like to share a short statement from our dear sister Irom Sharmila Chanu sent to us *all from the hospital bed* she has been incarcerated in for more than three years. We would like to mention for the remembrance of this forum our young sister Irom Sharmila Chanu who since November 2000 has been on an indefinite *fast in protest* against the innumerable killings of innocent people in Manipur by state security forces under the protection of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958, a draconian law that violates India's constitutional commitments and international obligations under international treaty, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In honour of her single minded commitment to getting this Act lifted from Manipur, we in CORE have been attempting to meet her and ask her to record a statement for this meeting honoring indigenous women at this Permanent Forum.

She is still being force-fed under police guard, in judicial custody, in the security ward of the Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital, in Imphal without access to her family, friends and supporters, to offer her solace *strength support and counsel* in this terrible ordeal she is going through. There is little opportunity to meet her or to find out about her health or circumstances.

She has passed on this message:

"In my heart there is no difference of man and women, all are same. What I am doing is for our Motherland. We are born in this land and we live here, so what I am doing is to respect my Motherland. I see all the human beings as same. There is nothing I want to say and appeal to anyone, and what I can say is what every woman can say. Don't give me more respect than others... While we talk about Indigenous peoples, before some months I heard that one man from Manipur introduced a rice mill which is run by leg, but nobody gave him any encouragement and nobody cared of that. I am really sorry that we all the people speak in mouth one and do just the opposite. We the people cut the trees and they never think that the trees give us oxygen and no one feels shame to use the oxygen. We need to preserve our natural environment and our natural resources for all future generations."

Mr. Chairman, it is so important for all of us to realize that as Chanu Sharmila protests about the human rights violations against her people, she, as a woman is also concerned about our natural environment, our lands and our collective future as do all indigenous women.

The unequal and discriminatory land laws that operates and govern our land have caused divisions among the indigenous peoples of Manipur who have traditionally lived together sharing the resources and lands. Different laws apply to different part of our lands. The Manipur Land Reform and Land Revenue Act (MLR & LR Act 1957) does not protect our collectively enjoyed land rights from non-indigenous peoples, private corporations or state development projects. Its continued application or extension to all our lands would be destructive to all the indigenous peoples, with women being the hardest hit.

The government of India has recently introduced a draft National Policy for Tribals and also promulgated the National Policy on Resettlement and Rehabilitation 2003. Other policies such as the Environment Policy, which have great significance to indigenous peoples, are under framing and have been kept outside the purview of the peoples. These policies violate human rights. The draft National Policy for Tribals is a primitive policy document that explicitly espouses an agenda of "assimilation", in total violation and disregard of indigenous peoples' human rights in India. Such a policy, if adopted would result in the total annihilation of small and remote indigenous communities, such as the Jarawa people of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the Kharam and Tarao of Manipur and many others in India. The huge and unabated influx of non-indigenous populations into indigenous peoples' lands and territories is yet another example of this assimilation policy that is being promoted in our country, threatening our distinctive culture and identity.

On behalf of the indigenous organisations making this joint statement I would like to make the following recommendations:

1. The Permanent Forum must give its attention to situations of armed conflict existing today in many indigenous peoples' lands and territories. The impact of armed conflict and military activities has devastated us and our lands, while opening up our environment and natural resources to continued exploitation by unscrupulous private and state owned corporations under the agenda of economic liberalization, a free market and globalisation during our time of suffering. The Forum must take

immediate and urgent steps to place such conflict areas in indigenous peoples under *its watchful eye* and encourage all UN agencies operating in such countries where conflicts exist to take up bold and human rights based programmes and activities to protect and promote the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples in accordance to existing international standards and principles.

2. The Forum should advise and strongly recommend to States which have imposed inappropriate or extraordinary and oppressive legislation that *violate fundamental freedoms* and human rights to review these laws and repeal them in the interest of indigenous peoples. The Forum should work very closely with UN treaty monitoring mechanisms to ensure that these treaties are honoured in spirit and in word.
3. The Permanent Forum should recommend to states to *develop and implement* human rights based national policies for indigenous peoples that are developed in close and meaningful consultation with indigenous peoples. UN specialised agencies and bodies should be advised to pursue a policy of due diligence to respect indigenous peoples' human rights and lands while undertaking their activities. *States should be advised to particularly give attention to small and threatened indigenous communities whose very existence as peoples are in jeopardy.*
4. The Forum should recommend that existing thematic mechanisms under the UN take particular measures to study and report on the *situation of Manipur* in order to restore human rights.
5. Finally, we fully endorse the statement on human rights made jointly by the Asian Indigenous Peoples' Caucus and the statement made by the International Indigenous Women's Caucus.

Thank you for your attention.