

Statement by Anna Pinto

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Agenda item 7(c) The human rights situation of indigenous peoples in States and territories threatened with extinction for environmental reasons.

Climate change and unprecedented environmental threats due to a number of anthropogenic activities, particularly activities undertaken in the name of development, is the harsh reality today. The planet is already experiencing its impacts on biodiversity, freshwater resources and local livelihoods. All over the world the situations of indigenous and tribal peoples, and their lands and territories, are being heavily impacted adversely by a number of emerging and new environmental threats. The working group has correctly put the perspective that the on-going criticality of the indigenous peoples and human rights problématique needs to be examined in the light of life-reducing and habitat extinction threats due to environmental reasons.

We would like to seek the attention of this august body to two aspects of this agenda sub-item - how continued State and private corporate interventions such as the massive damming of rivers in indigenous peoples' lands and territories for hydroelectric power generation seriously threaten us with extinction and also threaten the world now undeniably into a vicious cycle of climate disaster and global warming.

A recent report released by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Nepal Programme in March 2005, 'An Overview of Glaciers, Glacier Retreat, and Subsequent Impacts in Nepal, India and China', focuses on the alarming changes that are occurring in the Himalayan glacier compact, known as the "Water Tower of Asia". We highlight this report because the geographical territories covered by this report are also the ancestral home of a multitude of Indigenous nations and peoples in Asia.

Fragile ecosystems like glaciers in the Himalayas face inevitable disaster if the current climate change trends up to 2100, assessed by the Third Assessment Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2001) are to be believed. The average global temperature may rise by 1.4° - 5.80°C, according to this expert report. Seventy percent of the world's freshwater are frozen in glaciers. Glacier melt not only buffers other ecosystems against climate variability but also sustains the ancestral lands, biodiversity, heritage and livelihoods of hundreds of Indigenous peoples and nations in the Himalayan region. The Himalayan glaciers feed seven of Asia's great rivers: the Ganga, Indus, Brahmaputra, Salween, Mekong, Yangtze and Huang Ho. It ensures a year-round water supply to millions of indigenous peoples and their lands.

Sixty-seven percent of glaciers are retreating at a startling rate in the Himalayas and the major causal factor has been identified as climate change. Glacial melt will affect freshwater flows with dramatic adverse effects on biodiversity, and indigenous peoples and livelihoods, with a possible long-term implication on regional food security.

Moraine dams and subsequent Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs) created by glacial retreat have already caused havoc in Siang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh, home of the Adi indigenous people, and Pareechhu river basin of Tibet and Himachal Pradesh in India during the past 5 years. The WWF overview report sees the impacts of climate change on glaciers and its subsequent impact on freshwater as a major issue, not just in the national context but

also at a regional, transboundary level. The assumption that we live in a stable and predictable climate no longer holds.

The unprecedented thrust by the Asian States of South, South-East and Far-East Asia seeking to meet energy requirement projections have identified massive step up on hydropower project infrastructure build-up in this region. India's 50,000 MW Hydropower Initiative envisages the construction of 62 large dams in the Indian territories of the North East region. Out of these, 42 large dams are in Arunachal Pradesh, 3 in Manipur, 3 in Mizoram, 3 in Nagaland, and 11 in Meghalaya, These initiatives also involve a massive destruction of our forest areas, which we have nurtured for our own agriculture, hunting, fishing and collecting use including the maintenance of our cultural heritage.

In addition to this plan, massive high tension power grid connectivity is being planned in the entire Himalayan region, mostly in the fragile North East region, which will crisscross indigenous territories and lands, and connect, with the Greater Mekong Sub-region infrastructure buildup in South East Asia linking up through the indigenous territories of northern Burma (Myanmar).

Environmental threats including climate change have introduced a totally new and unpredictable variable into the debate of what is a "safe dam". The recent disastrous flood in the Brahmaputra basin in 2004, affecting all the 27 districts of Assam, has directly implicated dams, human made as well moraine or ice dams, which had 'overtopped', broken down or had to be opened to save themselves. The lower lands of the indigenous Boro in western Assam, the Mising in upper Assam including the world's largest river island of Majuli on the Brahmaputra today face total extinction.

For the small indigenous peoples and nations, such an onslaught on their environment and natural heritage will definitely mean extinction. Yet, we have never been informed nor consulted on all these grand schemes and plans. New policy and legislation are being introduced in a bewildering pace without our knowledge. The Indian draft National Policy for Tribals lies in limbo due our opposition in a series of Indigenous peoples' assemblies across the country, but a new law is now being sought to be introduced in Indian parliament - the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill 2005 even before the policy is finalised. The new Bill, which has been developed by a process guided by an extremely narrow base of so-called experts, seeks to accord limited tenure right to only Scheduled Tribes, as defined by the Indian government, at par with private corporations and parties while denying us our collective ownership rights in an inclusive context. We in the North East region have rejected this Bill and sought a thorough review of its purported premises and protection provisions.

The world today recognises the global importance of the Eastern Himalayan region, home to more than a hundred distinct indigenous peoples and nations. Yet, we are now facing extinction due to the impacts of climate change and the greed of corporate expansive working in tandem with State governments who have abandoned their responsibilities and obligations under their own Constitutions or international treaties. The Kyoto Protocol and its Clean Development Mechanism under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, includes considerations like hydroelectric dams, planted "forests", the adaptation of indigenous communities living in small island nations and territories and so forth, but these considerations have been hijacked by corporate and trade priorities - the human rights of indigenous peoples lies in tatters. We recommend this working group to consider the very serious examination of this issue as a major thematic.

Thank you