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Opening statement

by

**Mary Robinson,
United Nations High
Commissioner
for Human Rights**

to the

**Open-ended working group on
the permanent forum for
indigenous people**

**Geneva, 14 February 2000
Palais des Nations Room 17**

It gives me great pleasure to open the Commission on Human Rights's second open-ended working group on the permanent forum for indigenous people within the UN system. I would like to welcome all delegations and address a special greeting to indigenous representatives who are present. Having listened carefully to their views on the matter I propose to use the term indigenous peoples whenever possible.

This working group is charged by the Commission on Human Rights with the task of preparing one or more concrete proposals on the establishment of a permanent forum for consideration by the Commission when it meets during March and April.

The original proposal to consider the establishment of a forum for indigenous people was made by the World Conference on Human Rights in June 1993. The General Assembly, in its resolution 50/157 adopting the programme of activities for the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, identified as one of its main objectives the establishment of such a forum.

The Office of the High Commissioner, at the request of the Commission, has organized a number of meetings to discuss the forum. In June 1995, a first workshop was held in Copenhagen. A second workshop to discuss the forum met in Santiago de Chile in June/July 1997. The proposed permanent forum has been the subject of discussion at sessions of the Working Group since 1995. In 1998 the Commission decided to establish an open-ended

working group to examine and develop the proposal and its first session took place in February 1999. The working group last year made substantial progress, allowing an analysis of all the major issues, including those that still require further debate. I believe it is fair to say that there is growing consensus about the need to establish a permanent forum for indigenous people and a momentum to bring such a forum into existence in the near future.

In addition to these UN meetings, indigenous organizations have met regionally to deepen their understanding about the proposed forum and develop their own ideas. Such meetings have been held in a number of countries including Chile, Panama, India, and most recently in Chiang Mai in Thailand where my office was represented. Indigenous peoples are clearly deeply committed to the eventual creation of the forum and have, through these meetings, prepared themselves well for the discussions over the next week and a half.

After comprehensive consultations with indigenous peoples and governments and at the request of the Commission, the Chairperson-Rapporteur of last year's open-ended working group, Mr Richard van Rijssen, has drafted and circulated a paper which contains a useful framework for this session's work and a number of specific proposals that hopefully will provoke fruitful and focussed discussions and consensus proposals.

I do not underestimate the difficulties that lie ahead. I am aware that the idea of a high-level forum including indigenous representatives as members is new and largely unprecedented in the UN system. Delegations of governments and indigenous peoples

will need to build a real bridge of understanding. I am struck by the priority given to the establishment of this forum in my discussions with representatives of indigenous peoples. It will not be easy but the progress made last year augurs well.

I would like to make two points in relation to the permanent forum. The first concerns the mandate that such a forum may elaborate and here I am speaking in my capacity as Coordinator of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People. It seems clear that there is a need for a forum to help to harmonize and give coherence and direction to the UN system's growing programme relating to indigenous peoples. This was implicit in the Secretary-General's review of mechanisms, procedures and programmes concerning indigenous people submitted to the General Assembly in 1997. The mid-point review of the Decade, presented to the General Assembly last year, identifies a wide variety of activities directed towards indigenous communities throughout the UN family but it contains no formal mechanism for sharing information and experiences and for coordinating and strengthening the overall programme for indigenous peoples.

To the extent possible, the Office of the High Commissioner actively works with sister organizations within the UN system. Cooperation has led to fruitful results and a number of UN organizations - ILO, UNESCO, WHO, UNDP, the World Bank, WIPO and several others - are committed to activities benefiting indigenous communities within their areas of competence. However, a formal UN body in which all interested parties, including governments, indigenous peoples, UN specialized agencies, NGOs, experts and others, able to discuss all relevant matters such as health, education,

development, environment and human rights will contribute to a more transparent and coordinated institutional approach by the international community. I may add that I believe that the forum will help to rationalize and make more efficient system-wide efforts to address indigenous concerns.

The second point I would like to raise is related to the technical and practical questions which you will discuss. No one is more aware than I am of the financial constraints faced by the UN. There is an exponential growth in demand for the UN's services and only modest increases in financial and human resources. Sometimes resources may not increase at all or even decrease. Governments are aware of these restraints since they impose them. Notwithstanding, the forum should not be delayed because of these practical difficulties. A good project that brings benefits to the peoples the UN is here to serve should not be thwarted by such technical obstacles. Therefore, I want to express to you my personal commitment that the Office of the High Commissioner will make every effort to assist in a practical way with the realization of the forum.

I think governments and the international community as a whole will reap great rewards from the active partnership that the forum promises. While indigenous peoples have legitimate grievances, they are also coming to the United Nations with proposals for collaboration, with different and positive visions, with ideas and experience and advice and knowledge. More than at any time, the international community needs indigenous peoples in its midst as part of our global efforts to bring peace, promote sustainable development, eradicate poverty, and strengthen democracy.

If I make these comments about the need to involve indigenous peoples in the work of the United Nations, it is because indigenous peoples are, and in many countries continue to be, one of the most excluded and marginalised groups in society. I want, therefore, to use this occasion to urge indigenous delegations to play a full part in the preparations for the World Conference against Racism that will take place in South Africa in August 2001.

On 1 - 5 May, a preparatory meeting of the World Conference will take place in Geneva. I hope that indigenous delegations will try to take part. As part of the preparatory process, our office will organize a number of seminars and workshops.

In October/November, a seminar on indigenous peoples and the administration of justice is planned and I hope that further information about this event will be available by May. The focus of that seminar will be on national experiences and practices that are aimed at improving indigenous access to the justice system, ensuring the fair and equal treatment of indigenous individuals, protecting against violations, and respecting indigenous legal systems and institutions. I hope that indigenous delegations will consider how they can contribute to the success of the World Conference so that the scourge of racism is definitively eliminated.

Thank you.

I would now like to turn to item 1 of the provisional agenda and ask for nominations for the Chair of the open-ended working group...

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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Open-ended working group on the permanent forum for indigenous people,
Geneva, 14 February 2000, Palais des Nations Room 17

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Thank you.

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