



**First Session of The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Item 6 of the Provisional Agenda
Theme: Economic and Social Development**

Mr.Chairperson,

I am Legborsi Saro Pyagbara representing the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP).On behalf of the Ogoni People, I congratulate my fellow Indigenous brothers and sisters who are here today as living witnesses to the formal inauguration of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues-A dream most of our ancestors longed to see but did not live to see.

However, I take solace in the Ogoni traditional belief that though they are not here physically, their watchful eyes and presence continue to be with us spiritually even in this forum.

My dear brothers and sisters, I come from a group whose socio-economic condition today represents one of the greatest paradoxes of history. I represent a people which decades ago were the food-basket to other regions of my country but today have been reduced to food-beggars not by choice but by the combination of titanic forces which encompasses issues of economic strangulation. This strangulation is caused by our complete exclusion from the mainstream of economic life of the country by the operators of the Nigerian-nation state and eco-terrorism waged by multinational oil corporations led by Shell Petroleum Development Company exploring for oil in Ogoniland, for which we are richly endowed but which has today made us one of the poorest of the poor in Africa.

I speak here today as a representative of the burden of an entire generation of people who are fast losing touch with their civilization because of the conscious effort by the government of Nigeria to totally extinguish their existence. According to the Times Magazine of July 7,1987,"The loss of language is not just the loss of an incomprehensible tongue. It marks the loss of an entire culture and civilization." In Nigeria today, while the government guarantees in its constitution the study and usage of the majority's languages, the languages of indigenous minorities like the Ogonis are not protected. Attempts by indigenous communities to teach and use their language without government support are also met with

resistance by the government. And our language, the very basis of our social intercourse and economic interaction, is made to founder and die.

The traditional Ogoni economy is largely an agro-based economy ranging from farming, fishing, hunting, tapping of wine which all revolves around land - The soul of our existence and the basis of our consciousness. In the first quarter of the last century, Shell arrived in the Ogoni region to begin the economic exploitation of Oil in Ogoniland, which also marked the beginning of the destruction of our social and economic life and our land - Our ultimate heritage. This destruction has been caused by the unsustainable exploitation of the oil resource in Ogoniland by foreign companies, which apply a double-standard of operating practices in Indigenous communities, doing in Africa what they dare not do in their home countries. This has led to gross environmental abuse, which in turn resulted in the low-yielding capacity of our land on which our agro-based economy depends. Fish lost their breeding capacity to the flames of gas-flaring while flora and fauna surrendered to the toxicity of oil pollution and acid rain. These combined together to make Ogoni an economic wasteland.

The effect of these negative ecological impacts has given rise to an environmental refugee situation where Ogoni people are deserting their homes in droves to cities to live in slums and look for other means of support as their land no longer offers the economic, social and environmental support it used to give in times past. This also implicates our right to housing.

Recommendations

In recent years, the United Nations has made some efforts in addressing the socio-economic issues of Indigenous peoples. *Their efforts have rather ended up in being a case of only helping but not really developing.*

We wish to say that in reviewing the activities of the United Nations and its systems in relation to addressing the socio-economic development of Indigenous peoples, one of its greatest failures has been the continued reference to the Nation-State – an artificial creation of maps and lines, as the basis for its contacts with Indigenous peoples on development issues. According to an Ogoni saying” When you visit a home, you greet the elders first before greeting others”. All Indigenous

peoples are older than the present contraption called the Nation-State in which we find ourselves. We therefore strongly recommend that the U.N. and its agencies break the barriers of maps and lines of nation states and develop more inclusive means of dealing directly with Indigenous peoples for its socio-economic programs to impact positively on Indigenous peoples.

We would also recommend that the United Nations strive to make the existing international instruments on economic and social rights more obligatory on States and proper mechanism for their enforcement put in place.

We also call on the Permanent Forum to put pressure on the Nigerian government to restore the basic rights of Indigenous peoples in Nigeria to the control and the fair use of their economic resources for their development.

Mr. Chairman, I say thank you for giving me the opportunity to address this historic forum and to the audience, I say thank you for listening.

Legborsi Saro Pyagbara
Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP)
27 Odu Street, Ogbunabali
Port Harcourt - Rivers State
Nigeria
ph/fax: 234-84-233907; e-mail: mosop@phca.linkserve.com