



Meeting of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
13-24 May 2002, United Nations – New York

Item 6: Review of the Activities of the United Nations system – Economic and Social Development

Statement by Fr. Joseph Gomes OMI, Bangladesh

Thank you Mr Chairman for giving me this opportunity to speak.

Distinguished members of the Permanent Forum, Government delegates, UN representatives, Indigenous brothers and sisters, my name is Fr. Joseph Gomes, representing Khasi and Garo indigenous peoples, a very small indigenous community of Bangladesh.

Traditional development activities undertaken by the government and non-governmental organisations do not bring fruitful benefit to indigenous peoples. Many times indigenous peoples have to face eviction from their ancestral lands and territories without their consent. Even the government does not consult with indigenous peoples prior to their development planning.

I come from the north-eastern part of Bangladesh where I work with Khasi and Garo people who make their living on their lands from the plantation of Betel leaf. Many of these people do not have official land title certification, however they have been living in the hills and forests for over a thousand years. During this time they have practised conservation planting methods and have cared for the forests and the hill lands.

In 2000 our government made a plan to establish an Eco-park on Khasi and Garo land. This was done without consultation with the respective indigenous communities. As a result of this the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh began a democratic movement against the Eco-park.. Because of the commitment of the movement to peaceful protest and their strength of purpose, the government was unable to implement the project – however it has yet to cancel the project. So the life of Khasi and Garo people in north-east Bangladesh is still uncertain.

Mr Chairperson, this is why we see ‘development’ as sometimes bringing harassment to our lives. I would request that the UN and this historic Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues ensure that indigenous peoples are full participants in development processes and activities. This would also mean ensuring that there are effective consultation processes in development activities. Indigenous peoples should be in control of their own development and initiatives undertaken by Indigenous Peoples should be supported and strengthened by the international community, donor agencies and the UN.

The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues should have its own voice to stop projects such as the Eco-park, and other so called development activities harmful to Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous organisations and institutions should be given priority to work for themselves and their institutional capacity should be developed. They should have access and participation in policy-making bodies and subsequent implementation mechanisms.

Let indigenous peoples do their own development. The new vision of development for indigenous peoples should begin with hope and aspirations. The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues must ensure that a new dawn will come to our life.

Thank you all.

Fr. Josph Gomes OMI
Sanjeeb Drong
Bangladesh
Email: sdrong@bangla.net