

THE PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Statement by the Saami Council, presented by Ms. Anne Nuorgam
Agenda Item 5; General Statement

First Session

New York, May 16, 2002

Thank you Mr. Chairperson,

As stated yesterday, the Saami Council finds the establishment of this Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues one of the most significant achievements in the continuous struggle for respect for the world's indigenous peoples, their ways of life, their cultures and their rights.

For the first time in the United Nations' history, indigenous peoples and governments meet here on a truly equal basis. My organization believes that this kind of cooperation between indigenous peoples and governments – and which also involves the UN agencies – can prove to be the spark that encourages the international community to finally adequately address the problems and concerns of the world's indigenous peoples. Only if all relevant parties work together - with the same commitment - can we end the ongoing discrimination of our peoples. We view the establishment of the Permanent Forum as a sign of an increased acknowledgement of that improvement of the situation of indigenous peoples can only be achieved through a sincere and honest cooperation with the indigenous peoples themselves. It is therefore my organization's hope that the Permanent Forum will contribute to a full recognition by the United Nations' member states of indigenous peoples as equal partners with other peoples and states, and thus, that when discussing issues of importance to both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, we will always be invited to the negotiating table on a truly equal footing.

Unfortunately, such is not the case today. Several states still fail to recognize indigenous peoples as "peoples", equal in dignity, value and rights with other peoples. It must be a top priority for the

Permanent Forum to in all possible ways work for such a recognition. Unless states acknowledge indigenous peoples as peoples, with the full and unqualified right to ourselves determine the development and direction of our societies and cultures, there can be no permanent and fruitful cooperation between indigenous peoples and states. We must be allowed to decide ourselves our own affairs. States cannot adequately address the concerns and needs of our peoples. It has proven detrimental to our societies. We therefore commend the deputy Secretary-General for highlighting the right to self-determination when addressing the Permanent Forum last Monday.

As one step towards recognizing indigenous peoples' right to determine our own affairs – and to demonstrate that the Permanent Forum constitutes a truly different body in the United Nations systems – the Saami Council recommends that the Permanent Forum adopts Rules of Procedure that allow indigenous parliaments and tribal governments to participate in the Forum sessions in their own capacity, as elected representatives of their respective peoples, as they, in a longer perspective, should be allowed to represent their peoples in other ECOSOC bodies, in the General Assembly and in all UN agencies.

Mr. Chairperson,

The Permanent Forum has not been equipped with its own secretariat. Without adequate administrative support, the Permanent Forum members will not be able to adequately fulfill their tasks, and hence not the mandate for which the Forum was established. Therefore, the Saami Council strongly recommends that the Permanent Forum at its first session passes a resolution calling for the establishment of an independent secretariat for the Permanent Forum.

As to the location of the secretariat, the mandate of the Permanent Forum is not limited to issues relating to human rights. Rather, the Permanent Forum is mandated to address issues within the full mandate of the ECOSOC, including issues relating to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health *and* human rights, as indeed recognized by the High Commissioner when she addressed the Permanent Forum last Monday. Until now, the Office of the High Commissioner has been responsible for administering the first session of the Permanent Forum, and we extend our warmest

gratitude for the High Commissioner's assistance to the Permanent Forum in this regard. However, given that the Permanent Forum's mandate goes beyond that of human rights, the secretariat of the Permanent Forum should not be connected to the Office of the High Commissioner. The Saami Council therefore recommends that the resolution calling for the establishment of an independent secretariat for the Permanent Forum declares that the secretariat be connected to the parent body of the Forum, the ECOSOC.

The Saami Council would also like to extend our gratitude to the Interagency Support Group, established by the UN agencies to assist the Permanent Forum in its daunting tasks. As has been pointed out by several organizations, for the Permanent Forum to be successful, it is essential that the Forum establishes a close cooperation with the agencies, and the Support Group can certainly prove beneficiary to this interaction. In this context, we have been very pleased during the last couple of days, to listen to the agencies willingness to engage in interactive, and concrete, discussions with the Forum members and other participants. We encourage the agencies to continue on this trail.

However, it is equally important that the Permanent Forum independently gets to elaborate its own ideas and thoughts on how it would like to structure its cooperation with the agencies, and otherwise conduct its activities. It is therefore necessary that the agencies have no administrative responsibility for the Permanent Forum. Consequently, the Saami Council strongly opposes any suggestion implying that any secretarial duties for the Permanent Forum be administered by the Agency Support Group.

Lastly, as one of the members of the Steering Committee of the Indigenous Peoples Millenium Conference, the Saami Council wishes to resubmit to the Secretariat the following documents:

- The Indigenous Peoples' Millenium Conference Statement,
- The Indigenous Peoples' Millenium Conference Review of the UN Decade for the World's Indigenous Peoples, and the
- Resolution of the Indigenous Peoples' Millenium Conference on the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Thank you Mr. Chairperson.