

First Session of the UN Permanent Forum On Indigenous Issues

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Statement by Ram Doyal Munda

Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, India

Honourable Chairman, distinguished government representatives, representatives of specialized UN agencies, and fellow indigenous representatives from around the world. I greet you all on behalf of the indigenous and tribal peoples of India. At the outset on this historic occasion of the formation of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous issues, I respectfully pay homage to our predecessors and ancestors for their struggles of nearly one hundred years, particularly during the last quarter of a century, for without their insistent efforts this long cherished dream would not have become a reality.

Mr. Chairperson, while the task of setting the house in order, particularly in the beginning, is immense, we are confident that under the able leadership of your team, and the sought after cooperation from the UN agencies and the states, most of whom have already expressed their willingness to help, the initial hurdles, particularly the secretariat and its budget, will be overcome without much delay.

Functionally, however, I feel, the greatest challenge for the forum will be to deal with the issue of the fast paced process of globalization the indigenous peoples are faced with globally. It has been reiterated time and again in the deliberations of indigenous peoples' forums that holding on to their lands, forests and waters is basic to their survival.

As far as the indigenous peoples are concerned, that is precisely where the process of globalization is aiming at taking them away in the name of national interests and public good. We know we cannot stop the process, for the nation states, their physical boundaries melting away, have all succumbed to their economic demands, and the greatest pressure is on indigenous areas which are all endowed with natural resources. Therefore, the challenge for the indigenous peoples is how best to strike a favorable deal in the agreements of new partnership with the concerned states.

Keeping this in mind, I propose the following recommendations for the Permanent Forum to pursue:

1. Indigenous peoples be an equal party to the multilateral memorandum of understanding in all agreements pertaining to development projects in indigenous areas;
2. At no cost their ownership rights over land, forest, and water be surrendered by the indigenous peoples. At best the said resources could be leased out on short term basis so that the concerned agreement does not fade away from the memory of the concerned peoples which has very often happened so far depriving the indigenous peoples of the aimed at provisions. This will also enable the indigenous people to keep an eye on the functioning of the said project. Presently, what is happening in many cases, as is the case with most large scale projects in India, the projects set up are run at huge losses adding on to the already existing heavy burden of debt. Furthermore, upon closure the very lands which otherwise would not be available to outsiders, get transferred rampantly to them resulting in the increase of external population pressure which gradually edges out the indigenous population from their areas;
3. There must be a sufficient lead time in order for the indigenous peoples to be prepared for participation at appropriate levels of the proposed project. This will enable the indigenous people, at least partially, to own up the project which is most essential for a project to run successfully:
4. The indigenous peoples must have an equitable share in the outcome of such a project, in addition to the required preliminary compensation :
5. Efforts should be made to avoid displacement, and where displacement is unavoidable, there must be provision for cultural rehabilitation so that the concerned communities remain intact even after their relocation, contrary to what is happening presently:

The above mentioned arrangement, I believe, will contribute significantly towards enabling the indigenous peoples to take care of themselves in the long run.

I call upon the Permanent Forum to negotiate with the concerned UN agencies and the states to ensure meaningful participation of the indigenous peoples in place of the present prevailing notion among states that indigenous peoples are anti-development and anti-national.

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson, for your kind attention.