

Statement by Ledama Olekina to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

President Maasai Education Discovery

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Mr. Chairman, by linking the present to what has come before, commemoration serves a great purpose - it reminds us of our collective past and experiences, the values of our former bearers and prepares us for our future. Indigenous cultural histories are always rich in all aspects of development, which our diverse societies and governments should take into consideration when it comes to decision making. Today I speak on behalf of my people the Maasai, particularly the younger generation, who have been fighting for their basic rights, specifically the right to an education sensitive to their cultural heritage. When Western education was first introduced in Maasailand by the British in the early 1920's, the then governor of Kenya, Sir Charles Eliot, advocated the end of traditional African cultures, saying,

"There can be no doubt that the Maasai and other tribes must go under. It is a prospect that I view with equanimity and clear conscience . . . I wish to protect individual Maasai . . . but I have no desire to protect Maasaidom. It is a beastly, bloody system, founded on raiding and immorality, disastrous both to the Maasai and their neighbors. The sooner it disappears and is unknown, except in books of anthropology, the better."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Maasai have suffered greatly under the British colonial and post-colonial systems. Of approximately 300 000 Maasai, fewer than 800 have had formal educations.

In the last two decades, the lack of education in Maasailand has brought the Maasai untold suffering. For example without education politicians continue to exploit our people by inciting land clashes and directly appropriating our lands. Unless the Kenyan government is forced to introduce a system of education which caters for the lifestyles of the indigenous people, our people will continue to suffer.

The colonial legacy ensured that the British form of education dominates all other forms of education, hence the continued violation of Maasai peoples' human rights.

In this regards Mr Chairman, I wish to propose that permanent forum work plan should focus on promoting a bi-cultural approach to education for indigenous people worldwide by pressing national governments to introduce policies that protect the rights of the indigenous people. Indigenous people should be allowed to incorporate their cultural practices in their educational systems. Western educational systems emphasized in African states did away with the collective ethical codes that existed in precolonial Africa and relaced it with individual values.... Traditionally the Maasai maintain a stong sense of community that promotes collective ethical codes; thus we find it difficult to adopt Western ways of life while maintaining our cultural practices, which have assured our survival for centuries.

Today, we the Maasai have realized that the lack of formal education does little to lessen their isolation or further our participation in the global economy. Yet our resistance to formal education as advocated by our governments will continue until we are introduced to a form of eduction that fully includes our traditions. A bicultural approach to education is the key to providing the Maasai with this kind of education.

In the proposed bi-cultural approach to education, curriculum is developed through observation. Education pedagogy is derived from daily observations on changes in the environment. Maasai teaching methods include story telling, music, wise sayings and tongue twisters.