

SPEECH BY DR VISIER SANYU, NAGALAND UNIVERSITY, AT THE ELEVENTH SESSION OF THE WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS AT THE UN OFFICE, GENEVA, 19 - 30 JULY 1993.

It is an honour for me to say a few words at this very important meeting in the year of the Indigenous Peoples. I bring greetings from Nagaland.

First of all, allow me to say a few things about the Naga people by way of introduction.

The Nagas, an indigenous people, number about 3 million people. Their land occupies approximately an area of 47000 square miles touching China in the North, Myanmar in the East and North-East India in the West and South. The land of Nagas straddles the boundary line which the British, without consulting the Nagas, drew to demarcate India and Burma. This imaginary boundary line runs through the middle of villages and even houses. Before the advent of the British, Naga country was self-contained with village republics. The process of colonisation began in the 19th century, and by the end of the century, a sizeable portion of the Naga country was conquered. But more than half of Naga territory remained independent till the British left.

Refusing to be ruled by alien forces, the Nagas declared their independence on the 14th of August 1947. However, the administrations of India and Burma moved into Naga territory by force, and in due course this led to a serious armed conflict which is continuing even today.

Nagaland is a beautiful country, but it is a sad country today. The Nagas are suffering from various kinds of human rights violations. Division of their country between two nation states, superimpositions of other dominant administrations and cultures have created a number of problems. Transmigration and influx of illegal immigrants from neighbouring countries are threatening to make the Nagas a minority in their own land.

Today the Nagas want to live together as a people through unification of all Naga areas, the right to be free from the clutches of the occupational forces, the right to have UN recognition of Nagaland as nation.

Through all these aspirations, the Nagas have suffered much, and in this, have much in common with all other indigenous peoples. When we look back on our past or even view the present situation, we unearth a saga of hurts, repressions and bitterness. However, today our grate challenge is to rewrite history.

In the past, as we are all aware, might of numbers, arms and wealth have been the shaping forces and tools of history. Without these assets of worldly power, the indigenous peoples of everywhere have always been vulnerable and insecure. Suffering and humiliation are therefore constant realities of existence for us.

From our histories of beeing exploited for centuries, we have developed an unerring sensitivity to hurt and pain. But could it be that this very sensitivity may become our strongest asset for bringing healing to the wounded memories of races whose quests for revenge keep so much of the world bleeding and impoverished?

To secure the fullest human rights is essential for our survival in this world. The dedicated activists of indigenous peoples who have brought us to where we are in this field deserve our highest tribute and thanks. Yet if we stop at the pursuit of our own rights only, we may win pity and perhaps overdue concessions from the guilty nations but fail to rise to our greatest task, conditioned and stunted by a response syndrome of how others treat us.

Today I would like to leave this thought with you: To choose our highest right and option of using our tragic sufferings to heal the spirit of mankind could be our distinctive contribution.

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