

Joint Statement of the Asian Indigenous Peoples Caucus
 Agenda Item 8: On the establishment of a Permanent Forum

MINNIE DEGNAN

The Asian indigenous peoples caucus has deliberated on the issues concerning the establishment of a permanent forum within the UN on indigenous peoples.

First, we welcome the initiative of the UN to evaluate the existing UN mechanisms and bodies relating to indigenous peoples. We believe that such an evaluation is long overdue as proven by the multitude of issues presented by indigenous peoples in this early sessions of the WGIP. If the existing UN mechanisms and bodies were adequate to address the issues of indigenous peoples, there would be no need for hundreds of indigenous peoples to make the annual trip to Geneva to air their grievances. Madam Chair, we urge the UN to make such an objective evaluation of itself in the soonest time possible.

However, the establishment of the permanent forum should not be dependent on the results of such study. Such an evaluation should not serve as an excuse for the delay in the establishment of a permanent forum that will serve to alleviate the historic injustice done against our peoples. Madam Daes, we support the call for the establishment of a permanent forum for indigenous peoples in the soonest time possible.

In 1994, the Asian indigenous peoples have presented an outline of our proposals for the role and functions of such a forum and would therefore not go into this today. However, we do stress that among the primary tasks of the forum will be to act upon reports of human rights violations against the indigenous peoples. Madam Daes and other members of the WGIP, it has become very frustrating for many of us who travel all the way to Geneva to present reports on our situations only to be told that nothing could be done at this level. Hopefully, the permanent forum will be able to remedy this situation.

This task would mean that the permanent forum has to be, at the minimum, on the same level as the ECOSOC, or higher for it to be able to take meaningful decisions that will impact positively on our lives.

With regards to the composition of the permanent forum, we must reiterate the basic principle of involving indigenous peoples in the whole process for it to be relevant to our needs. The permanent forum could be composed of indigenous peoples and Government delegates but the indigenous peoples should be active participants in the decision making process. Furthermore, we recommend that the permanent forum

be chaired by an indigenous person.

Finally, Madam Chair, we urge the Governments and other relevant UN bodies to provide the necessary mechanisms and opportunities for more in-depth discussion on this matter at the local and national levels. The Danish Government has shown the lead by hosting the workshop in Copenhagen last year, we urge the other Governments to do the same. It must be remembered that this permanent forum is being set up to address centuries of oppression, thus the participation of the biggest number of indigenous peoples in all aspects of its establishment is of utmost necessity. The discussions will have to involve people at the grassroot level, hence governments are enjoined to create the positive atmosphere for such discussions to take place. The pressures on our communities brought by Government Policies and programs will have to be eased for our peoples to participate meaningfully. This Madam Chair is where the support group of the WGIP is most needed. You have as a group, and as individuals shown great concern to indigenous peoples in the past years, we urge you then to convince the Governments to take this issue as a most urgent one. Thank you!