

Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, April 20, 2010

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Distinguished Representatives of indigenous groups from around the world, Excellencies and distinguished delegates.

In his Presidential Proclamation last fall honoring Native American Heritage Month, President Obama recognized that the “indigenous peoples of North America—the First American—have woven rich and diverse threads into the tapestry of our Nation’s heritage.” What is true in the Americas is true around the world. There is no true history that does not take into account the story of indigenous populations—their proud traditions, their rich cultures, and their contributions to our shared heritage and identity.

But in the United States and many other parts of the world, indigenous communities continue to feel the heavy hand of history. Our first nations face serious challenges: disproportionate and dire poverty, unemployment, environmental degradation, health care gaps, violent crime, and bitter discrimination. Far more must be done—at home and abroad—to tackle these challenges, expand the circle of opportunity, and work with our Native communities to ensure they enjoy the security and dignity that all citizens deserve.

President Obama is deeply committed to strengthening and building on government-to-government relationships among the United States and our tribal governments. Our Administration has moved quickly to launch programs to improve the lives of Native Americans. Shortly after his inauguration, the President appointed my colleague, Kimberly Teehee, as his Native American policy advisor and began extensive outreach to tribal leaders. In November of last year, President Obama invited representatives from each of our 564 Indian tribes in the United States to attend a White House Tribal Nations Conference. Nearly 500 tribal leaders participated—the most widely attended White House tribal meeting with the President, Cabinet Secretaries, senior officials, and members of Congress in U.S. history. The President signed a Memorandum on November 5, 2009, directing every federal agency to develop plans to implement fully the Executive Order on “Consultation and Coordination with Tribal Governments,” which mandates that all agencies have an accountable process for meaningful and timely input by tribal officials in the development of regulatory policies that have tribal implications. The level of tribal consultation is now at historic levels—marking a new era in the United States’ relationship with tribal governments.

Last month, President Obama signed a historic reform of the U.S. health care system that includes important provisions to reduce the gaping health care disparities that Native Americans still face. Signing and implementing this landmark law constitutes a major step toward fulfilling our national responsibility to provide high-quality, affordable health care to all citizens, including American Indians and Alaska Natives.

The U.S. government has also made improving public safety in tribal communities a high priority. The Department of Justice supports an initiative to hire more Indian country Assistant U.S. Attorneys to prosecute cases of violent crime on Native lands. This initiative will also provide additional federal agents to support law-enforcement efforts in tribal communities. Combating crimes involving violence against women and children on Native lands is a particularly high priority for the U.S. government.

Last year, in the face of a global economic crisis, President Obama took swift action to spur economic activity and create new jobs. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act specifically allocates more than \$3 billion to assist tribal communities. These funds are being used to renovate schools on reservations across the country, to create new jobs in tribal economies, improve housing, support health care facilities, and bolster policing services. The President's Fiscal Year 2011 budget request also proposes a 5 percent increase in federal funding for Native American programs, to a total of \$18.5 billion.

The United States also supports programs that help indigenous communities around the world. We are especially committed to promoting corporate social responsibility, particularly with extractive industries whose operations can so dramatically affect the living conditions of indigenous peoples. The United States has therefore engaged in a multi-stakeholder initiative to encourage firms to operate safely within a framework that fully respects the rights of surrounding communities. We support the Initiative for Conservation in the Andean Amazon, a regional program designed to strengthen indigenous efforts to protect and conserve the Amazon Rainforest. In Peru, our common efforts focus on the conservation of the Manu National Parks, together with the Yanetsha and Ashaninka peoples, by providing training in sustainable resource management and expanding environmental conservation capacity. The United States also participates fully and actively in the Arctic Council, a high-level intergovernmental forum of the eight Arctic states where Arctic indigenous peoples -- represented by Permanent Participant organizations -- have a co-equal role.

Consistent with President Obama's call for a new era of U.S. engagement with the world, the United States applauds the Permanent Forum's efforts to raise awareness

of issues affecting the world's indigenous peoples and to generate ideas for substantially improving their livelihoods and communities.

Thus today, I am pleased to announce that the United States has decided to review our position regarding the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We recognize that, for many around the world, this Declaration provides a framework for addressing indigenous issues. During President Obama's first year in office, tribal leaders encouraged the United States to reexamine its position on the Declaration—an important recommendation that directly complements our commitment to work together with the international community on the many challenges that indigenous peoples face. We will be conducting a formal review of the Declaration and the U.S. position on it. And as we move ahead, we look forward to consulting extensively with our valued and experienced colleagues in the federally recognized Indian tribes and interested nongovernmental organizations.

While many steps have been taken in the Administration's first year, we are not satisfied. We seek to continue to work together with our partners in indigenous communities to provide security, prosperity, equality, and opportunity for all. There is no American history without Native American history. There can be no just and decent future for our nation that does not directly tackle the legacy of bitter discrimination and sorrow that the first Americans still live with. And America cannot be fully whole until its first inhabitants enjoy all the blessings of liberty, prosperity, and dignity. Let there be no doubt of our commitment. And we stand ready to be judged by the results. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.