

BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

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Bahá'í International Community Statement
to the fortieth session of the
United Nations Sub-Commission on
Prevention of Discrimination and
Protection of Minorities

Sixth session of the
Working Group on Indigenous Populations

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Agenda item 5: Standard-setting activities:
Evolution of standards concerning the rights of indigenous populations

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Madam Chairman,

At this session, the Working Group has entered a new season in its endeavours. After six years of careful study of the concrete problems and issues facing indigenous peoples and their governments, the Working Group is ready to begin the drafting of an international declaration to safeguard the rights and promote the status of indigenous peoples. Throughout these six years, members of the Working Group, and of the many indigenous organizations that have contributed to its activities, have shown great dedication, sincerity and good will in forging ahead with their task. Their efforts are about to bear fruit.

The Bahá'í International Community congratulates you, Madam Chairman, on preparing a well-conceived draft set of principles as a starting-point for discussion. We would like to make a few comments on these draft principles, on the content of a declaration on indigenous rights, and on the process of drafting the declaration.

At the outset, we believe that any declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples must emphasize four main principles: one, respect for indigenous communities and their cultures; two, appreciation for cultural diversity; three, full participation of indigenous peoples; and four, co-operation between indigenous peoples and their governments.

Firstly, a declaration should insist that indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and develop their unique cultures and ways of life. The declaration must, of course, condemn outright genocide, legally-sanctioned discrimination, and other direct forms of oppression. But it should also call for efforts aimed at erasing more subtle forms of discrimination and prejudice directed towards indigenous peoples.

Secondly, cultural diversity: Indigenous peoples have suffered terrible oppression because new settlers did not tolerate diversity, but viewed their own cultures as superior and more advanced. Appreciation for diverse cultures and ethnic characteristics is, in the Bahá'í view, a prerequisite for the elimination of discrimination against indigenous populations. We are convinced, therefore, that a declaration should call for educational measures that seek to foster an awareness of, and appreciation for, cultural diversity. All people -- indigenous peoples as well as members of other cultures -- should have the opportunity to benefit from mind-broadening educational programmes designed to increase understanding between indigenous peoples and the dominant society, as well as between different groups of the indigenous peoples themselves. For these reasons, we welcome preliminary draft principle 11, adopted by the Working Group at its last session, affirming the right of indigenous peoples "to promote intercultural information and education, recognizing the dignity and diversity of their cultures."

Thirdly, indigenous peoples must have the right to participate fully and actively in their national societies and in decisions that affect them. Their participation will enrich the lives of their national communities. More importantly, it will allow them to guide their own destinies. Full and active participation will enable indigenous peoples to develop the confidence, self-reliance and leadership skills that are essential if they are to play an active part in providing a higher level of social, economic and spiritual well-being for their peoples. It will permit them to become fully-contributing members of their national communities, while simultaneously preserving their unique cultures and identities. A declaration must call for measures to promote the development of opportunities for such active participation of indigenous peoples.

Fourthly and finally, cooperation between indigenous peoples and their governments is essential. In the Bahá'í view, respect for different cultures can only be achieved if we are able to perceive, underlying our cultural variations, our essential unity as one human race. Mutual respect will not come about through separatism or antagonism. Indigenous peoples feel understandable anger at the injustices they have experienced. But the amelioration of their current situation requires a new dialogue between indigenous peoples and their government -- positive communication aimed at finding ways to promote indigenous rights and participation. A declaration should call for such co-operation. It should advocate the creation of a permanent mechanism -- perhaps an ombudsman or a successor to this Working Group -- to bring indigenous peoples and their governments together on a regular basis so that they can air problems and perspectives and discuss remedies and solutions in a constructive manner.

Madam Chairman, the Bahá'í International Community believes that the draft you have prepared admirably enunciates, in an objective and positive way, the four principles we have underlined -- respect for indigenous culture, appreciation for diversity, full participation and co-operation. While believing that a declaration on indigenous rights must focus on these principles in its substance, we are also convinced that they must characterize the process of drafting a declaration. The drafting process should reflect an understanding of, and should encourage efforts to preserve, the unique ways of life that indigenous peoples have cultivated. In drafting the declaration, the Working Group should seek opinions from a wide variety of groups and indigenous organizations, thereby exemplifying in practice the appreciation for cultural diversity that the declaration must espouse. Moreover, it should encourage the active participation of indigenous groups in the drafting process and foster a spirit of co-operation in this delicate, yet crucial, enterprise.

Madam Chairman, it is evident that the Working Group is endeavouring to manifest the qualities we have just mentioned. We applaud the Working Group for this accomplishment. It shines as an example to other United Nations human rights organs of the possibilities for allowing the victims of discrimination -- in this case, indigenous peoples -- to have a voice in world efforts to improve their situation. The Working Group has focused on safeguarding indigenous culture, all the while recognizing the vast and multi-faceted array of cultures that deserve protection. It has conscientiously solicited the energetic participation of indigenous peoples in its deliberations, and also maintained an atmosphere of good will and co-operation. If the Working Group continues to follow the course it has wisely charted, we trust it will succeed in accomplishing its important mission.