

Working Group on Indigenous Populations
17th Session, 26 – 30 July 1999
Agenda Item 5
Intervention by Sovereign Diné Nation

Dear Madam Chairperson and delegates:

Yá'áteeh, my name is Helena Begay, *clan*, of Black Mesa Arizona from the United States. I am here representing the Sovereign Diné Nation. The Diné people of southwestern region of the US still have strong ties to their original homeland. The umbilical cord is usually buried inside the sheep corral, which bonds us with our ancestral lands which cannot be broken. To the Diné people, every inch of the land is sacred to us therefore; every day is a holy day. There is not a day out of the week we set aside for the purpose to say thank you through our prayers. We, the Diné nation, still practice our cultural and traditional ceremonies. With this way of life, natural medicinal herb are still used today by herbalist and medicine people during ceremonies.

The so-called Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute between the US Government, the Diné people and the Hopi tribal council continues to exist without resolution. Madam Chair, I seek the good offices of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Chair of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations to intervene in order for us to obtain justice. It is essential that you are aware of the urgency of this crisis, as those of us who remain on our traditional land face a deadline of February 1, 2000 for forced relocation and/or forced eviction, so that Peabody Coal Company will be allowed to destroy our livelihood, sacred sites and ancestral homelands. The government has begun issuing notices to vacate and Exclusion Orders. We are under pressure to sign the Accommodation Agreement or to be forced to be relocated to the Newlands. Twenty years ago, these newlands were contaminated by the largest radioactive spill from old uranium sediment ponds causing a high rate of birth defects in that vicinity.

We are accused of having overgrazed the land by our livestock. These animals provide natural fertilizers for the land they graze on. We deal with livestock confiscation and have to pay for the animals that have been seized by the Hopi rangers.

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The more land that is being stripped mined by Peabody Coal Company, more natural herb, vegetation, water and people are being destroyed. Burial sites, the roots of the Diné, are also being ripped out of their peaceful resting places along with the rich mineral resources the land contains. We are caretakers of the land and in return the land takes care of us. Due to the Coal mining in our sacred sites, it is almost impossible to continue this tradition that was carried down to us for many generations.

The land titles are traditionally transferred down to the daughters of the family but, under the Accommodation Agreement, this is not possible. We did not ask to be fenced in or to sign treaties for our people to abide by. The Diné people today still practice and respect their ceremonies, these are the natural laws that we still honor. The Government broke the Treaty of 1868 by utilizing our young educated men and our language as war tactic to win the war during W.W.II. Now, with only six months from the deadline, we wish to appeal to the UN system to intervene before it is too late. We think of and ask for our future generation that our traditional land rights and the traditional ways of passing the land on to the youth be recognized and respected so that we can continue to exist as Diné. We will continue to fight for what rightfully belongs to us. To me, home is where I find comfort and family, to the Diné, this land is our home.

Thank you very much for your attention and I sincerely recommend the Special Rapporteur will continue with the examination of this important issue pertaining to Land Rights. On behalf of my family and my people, Yéego 'ahéhéé'!