



UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and
Protection of Minorities - Working Group on Indigenous Populations

Oral intervention of Dr. Jeane Sindab, Executive Secretary,
Programme to Combat Racism,
World Council of Churches

before the International Working Group on Indigenous People
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Madame Chairperson, Respected representatives of nation-states, officials of specialised international government agencies, colleagues of the NGO community and esteemed members of the global indigenous community;

It is a distinct honour to attend this session and we join with others in congratulating you upon your election to the chair of this working group.

The World Council of Churches brings together more than three hundred churches from all parts of the world. One of its main functions is to express the common concern of the churches in the service of human need, the breaking down of barriers between people and the promotion of one human family in justice and peace.

The Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) of the World Council of Churches (WCC) was established in 1969 for the purposes of mobilising the churches to "move beyond charity grants and traditional programming to relevant and sacrificial action leading to new relationships of dignity and justice".

In moving toward a concept of justice beyond our historic "charity grants", the Church has been forced to be self-critical and to confront its own rôle as an accessory and even accomplice in the historic and contemporary involvement in acts of injustice against indigenous peoples. To our shame, we acknowledge the immense profit and privilege accrued to the Church as our missionary enterprises often have accompanied the cruel exploitation of indigenous peoples. To our credit, we are rediscovering the rôle of the "confessing Church", the indispensable need for humility and deference in mission, and the theological mandates for the Church to model covenant relationships with indigenous peoples which will inspire and encourage secular society on a course for compensatory justice.

From the very beginning the PCR has been mobilising the international church community to support the land rights' claims of indigenous people. The World Council of Churches has taken a clear position on land rights of indigenous people. We have provided opportunities for indigenous women in their efforts to become more actively involved in the struggle for the survival of their people. We have mobilised churches to address the concerns raised by

indigenous people in their regions by arranging for ecumenical team visits to various regions of the world. A PCR visit to Australia in 1981 resulted in the Uniting Church of Christ returning properties to the aboriginal people worth \$250,000 as an act of reparation and reconciliation.

Through our own intensive analysis and experience of racism, the Church has

become increasingly aware of its own prejudicial and ethnocentric social, cultural and political attitudes shared by many who sincerely intend to do justice to the indigenous peoples. Even in this session, we have heard echoes of paternalism and insensitivity in some of the statements though probably well-meant. Thus, we welcome and invite such scrutiny upon ourselves as we issue a challenge to all to be free from all racist, sexist and otherwise ethnically insensitive actions and statements. Certainly, the Church has suffered from its own insensitivity in this right and only wishes to assist others to avoid the attendant limitations of such attitudes and behaviour.

There is still much to be accomplished by the churches and it is hoped that many will enter into new covenants with the indigenous people in their regions. Through their own organizations and forums the indigenous people have focused international attention on their struggle for land, survival of their peoples and culture. They are forcing the issue of land rights to the top of the agenda of the international community. For PCR, land rights is one of its priority programmes. Landlessness is a root cause of racial and caste oppression affecting the PCR constituency in all regions of the globe. The dispossession of indigenous people from their land has been followed by attempts to alienate them from their language, culture, religion and traditions. For indigenous people, life is centered in their relationship to the land and Creation. The theft and forceful dispossession they suffer from their ancestral lands is the first crucial step towards their ultimate genocide. The first step of invading colonial and neo-colonial forces has always been to take away the land while encouraging other efforts (including those of the church) to deny indigenous cultural legitimacy and integrity. Deprived of their sustenance, indigenous people then can be forced into slave labour conditions, separated from their culture and religion, and stripped of all that has affirmed their self-worth historically.

Today indigenous persons are still being dispossessed of their lands. This forced removal must be stopped. Governments which have signed treaties with the indigenous nations must be made to honour such obligations. The Church and other non-governmental institutions and movements must desist from actions which, wittingly or unwittingly, provide moral sanction and political encouragement to such dishonour. Concurrently, we must insist that such obligations be fulfilled to the spirit and the letter as only a beginning step. The forced assimilation of indigenous persons separating them from their history and culture must cease. Indigenous persons must be allowed to define their own realities in their own terms. For their future survival, there is no question but that this UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations has an important rôle to play in helping to achieve these goals. This session of the Working Group is convening at a most critical time. Its members are to be commended for their efforts in the service of indigenous peoples. The developments since the establishment of the Working Group are promising. PCR applauds the revised ILO Convention which drops integration as a goal to be pursued by the indigenous peoples. We also applaud the establishment of the

UN Voluntary Fund to provide travelling expenses for indigenous people to attend these important meetings. As representatives of the interest of peoples to the international community, the Working Group must push even further to assure that the concerns and interests of the global indigenous community are fully addressed and redressed when necessitated by the highest moral and ethical standards.

The World Council of Churches receives daily horrendous information concerning genocidal policies towards the indigenous populations around the world.

Governments together with transnational corporations have declared a silent war against indigenous people leading to their deaths and the denial of their human rights. Their lands continue to be stolen, polluted and destroyed. Their peoples continue to be dispersed to distant, desolate (unproductive) areas. Their languages and cultures continue to be threatened. All these developments signal a major crisis of growing proportion in many regions of the world.

We would also like to recommend that the Working Group take specific actions on issues which have been raised repeatedly in previous meetings and conferences of the indigenous peoples. In conferences held in 1977 and 1981, recommendations were made that 1992 would be declared International Year of Solidarity with the Worlds Indigenous People and that October 12 be declared the United Nations' Day for the World's Indigenous Peoples. We wholeheartedly endorse this recommendation as a means of focusing international public attention on the plight of 200 million of the world's most exploited people. In 1992, the attention of the world should be focused on the tremendous wrong which occurred 500 years before and upon educating itself to the appropriate means of redress. In 1992 the myth of brave, adventurous, exploration into the unknown must be stripped away and replaced by the factual evidence of self-indulgence and materialistic expansion motivating the Europeans arrivals to the so-called "New Worlds" and what that meant for millions of indigenous persons.

We would also endorse another major recommendation resulting from the 1977 and 1981 conferences for the appointment of a Special Rapporteur by the Commission on Human Rights to investigate the status of treaties and other agreements between indigenous peoples and respective states. Such an investigation could be the first step in forcing the honouring of such treaties and admitting the expensive needs of indigenous peoples undertaking legal cases on treaty rights. Many of the applications for support we receive from indigenous peoples are for court cases concerning the return of land or prevention of new land being taken under existing treaties which are being ignored. Such an effort by the Commission on Human Rights would highlight as well the issue of political sovereignty so consistently denied indigenous nations.

We respectfully urge the Working Group to consider seriously the implementation of these two long-standing recommendations and take steps to expedite the implementation of its earlier commitments mentioned herein. We assure the Working Group ou our support.

Thank you, Madame Chairperson