

Opening remarks by Mr. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights at the 69th General Assembly - World Conference on Indigenous Peoples

New York, 22 September 2014

Mr. Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates, colleagues and friends,

It is a great honour for me to join you at the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples. I see this as both a celebration and a call for action.

We are here to celebrate the contributions that indigenous peoples make to our societies, and the progress that we have achieved towards full recognition and respect for their rights, including through the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

But we are also here so that States can commit to stronger action to close the gaps in implementation that continue to diminish the impact of the Declaration and other human rights standards. So that we can take action to enhance our combat against the discrimination, exclusion and land-grabs that indigenous peoples still experience in all regions of the world. Action which demonstrates that our resolve to advance the rights of indigenous peoples is not rhetorical, but real.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Many of you have travelled here from remote corners of the world. Some of the beneficiaries of the UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples have travelled for up to seven days, taking several boats and flights to attend this event, in order to highlight the challenges their communities face.

For many challenges remain. Seven years after adoption of the Declaration, specific, disaggregated data on indigenous peoples are lacking. But the harsh imprint of poverty and marginalization suffered by indigenous peoples is clearly visible in all the available statistics.

In developed countries, the percentage of indigenous people in prison is highly disproportionate to their numbers. In one country, indigenous children were 25 times more likely to be in detention than other children. In Latin America and the Caribbean, indigenous children are three times more likely than others to have no access to education, safe drinking water or housing. In Africa and Asia, indigenous young adults are more likely to be deprived of their right to education – especially if they are female. In the Arctic, the Pacific and Southeast Asia, indigenous women are at greater risk of death during pregnancy or childbirth than women from other communities; and their newborns and young children are also more likely to die.

Such stark statistics translate into thousands of human tragedies. Thousands of violations of human rights.

This World Conference and its outcome document constitute the stepping stones which will bring our work on indigenous peoples' rights to a new level. And as we do so, we must also recall the past.

Recently I learned about a story that I found very moving.

For centuries, an enormous rock that resembled a large, pale buffalo stood by the South Saskatchewan River in Canada. It was a sacred gathering place for indigenous peoples on the vast plains. But in 1966, in order to accommodate the construction of a dam and an artificial lake, that monumental rock was blown apart with dynamite. The waters rose and the jagged, broken pieces

were covered in darkness.

But last month, after a patient search, those pieces were found, deep under the waters. Once again, as their ancestors had done for generations, indigenous peoples could touch the remains of the rock and feel through it their connection to their past. The rock could not be reconstituted; its pieces will remain underwater. But the discovery will bring the rock's story to life. Generations to come will know where it is and what it has meant, and continues to mean, to their community.

Through this story, I understand that what has been done, is done. Often it has been bitterly unjust. But the indigenous peoples of the world have shown us their strength, their persistence, and their depth of wisdom. With clarity and knowledge, they are here with us to look forward, and build societies based on partnership, mutual respect and human rights.

At this World Conference, I urge you to once again pledge to ensure that the human rights and dignity of all indigenous peoples are acknowledged and fully protected, in line with the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

I am confident that the outcome document of this Conference will provide strong human rights tools to promote full application of the Declaration. The constant and vigorous engagement of human rights mechanisms is vitally important. We must also make sure that indigenous peoples' rights are fully embedded in all other international initiatives that affect them. The new post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals must be explicitly rooted in those rights, so that indigenous rights, lands and cultures can no longer be sacrificed in the name of skewed concepts of development. Indigenous peoples' concerns and recommendations will also be vital for tomorrow's Climate Summit, and for the 2015 World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction. Natural disasters and the effects of climate change are often borne by indigenous peoples – and they may also hold the traditional knowledge that can help mitigate these disasters.

But ultimately, the meaning and value of all these international processes can only be measured in real impact. The commitments that we make here, and in other conferences, must be followed up decisively at the national and local level, with resources and political will that match the ambitions expressed in speeches. It is easy to be brave from a distance, as the proverb says. We need real impact.

My Office, including its field presences together with our UN partners, stands ready to support your efforts, building on the work that we are already undertaking in close cooperation with Governments and indigenous peoples in all regions.

This World Conference has the potential to be a milestone in our quest to ensure full respect for the rights of indigenous peoples. I encourage you to set out clear goals and renewed commitment so that quest can move forward.

Thank you.