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TORRES STRAIT REGIONAL AUTHORITY

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WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS
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ADDRESS BY
THE CHAIRPERSON
OF THE TORRES STRAIT REGIONAL AUTHORITY
MR JOHN ABEDNEGO

Madam Chair
Distinguished Members of the Working Group
Indigenous Members of the World
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am extremely pleased and thankful that I am able to represent the indigenous people of the Torres Strait Islands of Australia for the second time at this important forum. For those who do not know me, I am John Abednego, the Chairperson of the Torres Strait Regional Authority, which is the statutory body formed by the Parliament of Australia. It was established in 1994 and is located on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait. Consequently, we are known as Torres Strait Islanders.

We are a Melanesian people who have strong cultural ties and traditions to the coastal villages of the Western Province of Papua New Guinea. The Torres Strait has a population of approximately 8000 people of which 6000 are Torres Strait Islanders, living on 19 small island communities. These communities are remote from each other and 1000 kilometres from the nearest big city.

Our identity, our unity and strength, as an indigenous race of people, is based on our culture. Our culture, in turn, is based on a long association with the sea. The sea is of central importance to our life: we are a seafaring people from ancient times: we are hunters and the sea and land hold our stories, which is our way of life.

The Authority is the peak representative body for indigenous people of the Torres Strait region. It has 20 elected members from all of the Island communities in the Torres Strait. We lobby for the rights of Torres Strait Islanders to achieve the same standard of living as all other people who live on the mainland of Australia. Our vision is to manage our own affairs through greater autonomy and to develop a sustainable economy so that we can reduce our dependency on welfare and increase our economic independence.

Madam Chair, since my speech of last year, a number of important events have occurred in the Torres Strait which have strengthened our drive for greater autonomy, improved our standard of living and given us hope for greater economic development and self sufficiency.

In August 1997 the Australian Parliament's House of Representative Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs handed down a report entitled, "Torres Strait Islanders: a *new deal* A Report on Greater Autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders". It enquired how Torres Strait Islanders would achieve greater autonomy in the Torres Strait region. The report to the Australian Parliament was both exciting and challenging for Torres Strait Islanders. Exciting as it recommended a number of radical changes to the Administration of the Torres Strait which would see far greater decision making power be put into the hands of Torres Strait Islanders. It also recommended a streamlining of the Administrative structures in the Torres Strait into one all encompassing entity called the Torres Strait Regional Assembly. This Assembly would deal directly with both the Australian and Queensland State Governments on an equal basis, and could in time form a self governing Territory of Australia. Similar to that of the Inuit Territory of Canada.

The challenge for Torres Strait Islanders is to progress the report in a way that is acceptable to all people living in the Torres Strait. This will entail extensive consultations with all Torres Strait Islander communities in the region as well as non-indigenous people. It is a challenge for the Torres Strait Regional Authority and other Administrative organisations in the region to progress the report to the fullest. I am pleased to say that both the Australian Government and the Queensland State Governments are supportive of the recommendations contained in the report. This demonstrates the level of maturity which exists between Torres Strait Islanders and Government.

The Australian Government has also given the Authority a commitment that it will have its own separate Act of Parliament, which will clearly distinguish Torres Strait Islanders as a separate indigenous race from Australian Aboriginal people. It is not that we are critical in any way of Australian Aboriginal people, far from it, but we as a separate indigenous people wish to be identified as such. We are proud of who we are and we are proud that the Australian Government has seen that we are separate. It is hoped that the Authority's separate Act of the Australian Parliament will be passed in late 1998.

Madam Chair, last year I mentioned the critical importance of the environment and sea to Torres Strait Islander's culture and way of life. I also mentioned that a moratorium on mining and drilling of the Torres Strait seabed, between the Governments of Australia and Papua New Guinea, was due to for expiry on 14 February 1998. Consequently, it was absolutely crucial for Torres Strait Islanders to secure a further extension of this moratorium if our way of life was not to be threatened. We like many other indigenous people of the world have no where to go if our environment is spoiled by pollution. If our environment is damaged, our culture is damaged.

I am pleased to say that the Australian Government fully supported Torres Strait Islanders in extending the moratorium. High level negotiation took place in Papua

New Guinea in December 1997 and an agreement was reached between both Governments that a further five-year moratorium would be put in place. The Authority views this as a major achievement as it ensured the protection of our natural resources from any possible environmental damage. The Government of Australia is to be congratulated in supporting the Torres Strait Islanders in this important achievement. I would also like to thank the Government of Papua New Guinea for its good faith over these negotiations.

Madam Chair, last year I also mentioned that the Authority was pro-actively holding discussions with the Australian and the Queensland State Governments regarding a proposal for major infrastructure development in the Torres Strait. We had hoped to secure extra funds for a much needed upgrades of basic health related infrastructure such as water, sewerage and housing. I am pleased to report back to the Working Group that an agreement has been reached with both Governments on a three-year infrastructure upgrade, valued at approximately \$60 million. The program is to be phased in over a three-year period with joint funding of \$10 million in the first year and the bulk of the remaining money coming in Years 2 and 3. This will ensure that the islands of the Torres Strait have adequate water and sewerage facilities, as well as an increase in housing, which will dramatically lift the health status of Torres Strait Islanders. Last year the community of Murray Island with a population of nearly 500 people had to exist on a ration of 10 litres of water per day, per person, for a number of weeks. This is not acceptable in Australia and the program will alleviate this situation from occurring.

Madam Chair, when I talk about political autonomy this must also go hand in hand with economic autonomy – which means economic development and self-sufficiency for Torres Strait Islanders. With the establishment of the Authority, as an autonomous body, it has allowed my Members to prioritise funds towards an enhanced economic development program. This economic drive by Torres Strait Islanders is supported by both the Australian and Queensland Governments.

Before the establishment of the Authority there were very few economic development opportunities for Torres Strait Islanders. We now have a portfolio of 60 loans and 8 community enterprises, valued at more than \$2 million. Autonomy for the Authority has allowed us to set our own priorities. This has occurred in only four years! The Authority has been at the forefront of economic development and fully supports the Australian Government's drive towards economic empowerment for indigenous Australians. The Authority is proud of its people's desires to take up the challenge of economic development.

Madam Chair, as I stated last year:- we have our vision,
We have developed concrete plans for advancement and
We have established constructive dialogues with our Governments.

I am pleased to report that our approach has paid substantial dividends in the year that has passed. We are a determined and strong people who know our rights and our needs. We are tough, but fair negotiators. I am pleased to say that the Australian Government has seen us for that. We are looking forward to the next year in the lead up to the Year 2001, which is the centenary of Australia's Federation. We seek to enter the new century working closely with the Australian and Queensland

Governments. We wish to achieve greater autonomy and know this is largely in our own hands as we grapple with the Australian Parliament's Autonomy Report. We will continue to strive that our people's standard of living is brought up to Australian standards and our youth can prosper through further economic development opportunities. We will also continue to ensure that the environment of the Torres Strait is kept safe for future generations.

Lastly, we will work with Australian Governments - of all persuasions - for the betterment of Torres Strait Islanders and the region to ensure we have a country that can stand proud and tall within the international community.

Thank you.