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**Presentation by the
World Blind Union
And
The Maliseet Nation at Tobique (Ne-Goot-Gook)
To The
United Nations
Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
May 13-24, 2002
United Nations Headquarters, New York
Presented by Wendall Nicholas
Representative for North America and the Caribbean
International Indigenous Committee, World Blind Union
Representative of the Maliseet Nation on Disability Issues**

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Nolithus Se Geg

Mr. Chairman, please accept my congratulations on your election as Chairman of the first session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. I bring Greetings to you, your esteemed colleagues on the Panel and to this Assembly on behalf of the Chairman of the International Indigenous Committee of the World Blind Union Maaka Tibble (Aetora) and Sachem Stewart Paul of the Maliseet Nation at Tobique (Ne-Goot-Gook). I am here at their request to address this Forum on Blindness, Vision Impairment and Disability Issues that affect Indigenous People.

I am Wendall Nicholas, A member of the Maliseet Nation at Tobique and the North American and Caribbean Representative to the International Indigenous Committee of the World Blind Union and Representative of the Maliseet Nation at Tobique on Disability Issues. I am humbled to be here - I wish to Thank my wife, son, parents, family and community for their love and support of my work.

As an Indigenous Person, I know that though I live with a sight disability, this gift from my Creator in no way interferes with the responsibilities I hold to protect my Inherent and Treaty Rights. The problems I face are exercising these Rights as I carry-on with my life. I call my disability a gift because I was born with it. It has shaped who I am – after all, I am here to address you today because of it.

When I attempt to exercise my Rights as an Indigenous person with a disability, colonial governments that occupy my people's land refuse to understand what they are. 20 years ago, when Canada was granted its Constitution from the Queen of England, A section of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms did recognize that Aboriginal and Treaty Rights exist, however these Rights have yet to be defined. This chasm allows Indigenous People with Disabilities in my area to be isolated from Canada's disability support structures. Indeed, Canada's Indian Act only explains how the Crown may dispose the assets of Registered Indians deemed as mentally incompetent, The Act does not describe how they access the services and supports they need. It is likely that the proposed Governance Act will also ignore our people with disabilities.

Indigenous People who are blind, visually impaired, or live with a disability around the world face similar and in many cases deeper challenges. War and sanctioned violence against them leads to their death, injury or disability. There are many of our Indigenous Brothers, Sisters and Children that live with disabilities because of violence against them or due to jurisdictional neglect. I urge this Forum to explore opportunities to understand how disability affects Indigenous Peoples.

This issue is not one that can be understood only by its relationship to health, rather it must be examined by the way disability affects Indigenous societies on the whole. Mr. Chairman, I wish to briefly informing you of three initiatives Indigenous people with disabilities have initiated to ameliorate the problems we face:

Firstly, people with disabilities in Akwesasne are establishing the Akwesasne Disability Consulate. The Akwesasne Mohawk Nation sits in a location where Canada and The United States of America imposed its international boundary line. As the first of its kind, the purpose of the Consulate is to deal with the jurisdictional burden imposed on people with disabilities in the community. In support of this, Leaders in the community have introduced the concept of legislation to protect the Rights of People with Disabilities in Akwesasne. I table with the Forum the Report, funded by the Akwesasne Area Management Board, which describes the work of this effort titled Te-We-Kwe-Kon 2001 Together As One.

Secondly, As intentional and non-intentional injuries are among the leading causes of death and disability of Indigenous People in Canada, The Assembly of First Nations released a paper this week at the United Nations sponsored 6th World Conference on Injury Prevention that was held in Montreal. The Report, authored by Dr. Rose-Alma McDonald (Mohawk National of Akwesasne) provides evidence to establish and support measures to prevent injuries in Indigenous Populations. I table with this Forum the Report, funded by the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada, titled Injury Control and Indigenous Populations in Canada: Implications for a First Nations Injury Control Framework.

Thirdly, The World Blind Union has established an International Committee for Indigenous Blind People. The mission of this committee is to promote the development of partnerships that foster dialogue, explore ways of advancing reconciliation, and addressing economic and social problems affecting Indigenous peoples in a united effort that respects the land, values the indigenous heritage, language and culture, and provides justice and equity for all. Our next face-to face meeting is scheduled for March of 2003 in New Zealand (Aetora). I table with this Forum the Strategic Plan of the International Indigenous Committee of the World Blind Union.

There are many more initiatives that I would like to bring to your attention Mr. Chairman, however The World Blind Union and The Maliseet Nation at Tobique (Ne-Goot-Gook) respectfully appeal that the following recommendation be considered and forwarded for action:

On the serious matter of the disparity, severity and impact of disability on Indigenous People, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues request that the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC): Convene an international meeting to establish recommendations and mechanisms to implement cooperation on injury prevention and control, access to culturally appropriate disability supports; and the protection of the Rights of Indigenous People with Disabilities.

Indigenous People with Disabilities are ready to assist the United Nations in this work. I wish to Thank the World Blind Union, Canadian National Institute of the Blind, the Maliseet Nation at Tobique (Ne-Goot-Gook) and the Assembly of First Nations for enabling me to present here today.

I wish you Peace and Nationhood. Waliwon