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**Statement to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues  
May 13-24, 2002  
New York, New York**

The Pueblo of Laguna, a sovereign Indigenous nation, extends its greetings to the distinguished members of the Permanent forum and all the indigenous representatives who have traveled from every direction to be here. On this historic occasion, the first meeting of the Permanent Forum, we would like to briefly address some of the issues the Pueblo of Laguna government and Laguna people face today.

The Pueblo of Laguna is located in what is now known as the State of New Mexico, in the United States. The population is approximately 7,500 persons. Our language, Keresan, is still widely spoken in the six villages that comprise the Pueblo and much of the business of the 21 member Tribal council is conducted in our mother tongue. The Pueblo operates under a constitutional government, electing secular officials every two years. The Pueblo Governor holds both secular and religious responsibilities. We have a two-tier tribal court system, with both civil and criminal jurisdiction, as well as tribal rehabilitation facilities. We also maintain systems of traditional dispute resolution. Currently, the Pueblo of Laguna employs approximately 225 individuals. Additionally, several tribal enterprises employ several hundred more individuals.

Historically, Laguna Pueblo has demonstrated both strong advocacy for and putting into practice the concepts of self-determination. Long before the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934 (known as a compelling force for passage of tribal constitutions), the Pueblo of Laguna elected to adopt a constitutional form of government. By 1872, the Pueblo was voting for its leadership. The discovery of uranium on Laguna land in the 1950's, while presenting both benefits and costs, did net royalties that helped the Pueblo of Laguna to begin building a modern infrastructure for tribal government.

Additionally, members of Laguna Pueblo have participated in federal, state and tribal citizenship. In fact, it was through the insistence of a member of Laguna Pueblo that Indians in New Mexico won the right to vote, in *Trujillo v. New Mexico*, in 1949. Like many other Indian nations, Laguna Pueblo members have served in the U.S. military in all major conflicts since World War I, in defense of the United States, long before they were recognized as United States citizens.

Today, we and all other sovereign nations, fight against erosion of our sovereignty in the United States Supreme Court. In the last few years, the Supreme Court has decided cases against the interests of sovereign Indian nations. At a time when we have more fully exercised that sovereignty, we find that the highest court in the country continues to adhere to discriminatory doctrines in the law that should not ever be tolerated under international law. These decisions have far reaching impacts on our land, our economic and social rights and our ability to exercise self-determination.

A key aspect of our exercise of self-government is defense of our land base, with the connected resources and water rights that our people need to survive. The Pueblo has participated in numerous legal battles over our land rights. It has been a policy of Laguna Pueblo to make every possible effort to expand our present land base of 500,000 plus acres by acquiring land that we have lost historically. Because of discriminatory practices and laws that diminished our land base, we are often in the position of purchasing land that we once owned. As our population grows, so do the needs for more space and housing for our members. Also, the Pueblo has been a party to a water rights suit in New Mexico for the last 20 years. Without a land base and sufficient water, it would not have been possible to engage in any of the economic enterprises that have created employment for members of the Pueblo.

Connected to preservation of our land, water and resources is the protection of our culture and our way of life. We believe that it is not possible to separate land and water from our culture. Addressing any one of these will always entail words about the connectedness of these elements of our way of life. Furthermore, no one issue is really at the forefront because of their interconnectedness. You will undoubtedly hear from other Indigenous nations, as we all try to teach the world about the importance of this connection. Furthermore, our culture is ours to preserve and protect, and it should be our decision if we choose to share aspects of it with others. Some may not always understand or agree with aspects of our culture, but we ask that they at a minimum, demonstrate some respect for our way of life. Respect is such a basic value and yet has been so lacking in the history of our relations with non-Indigenous people and entities.

If we are to continue our progress in self-governance, we will need healthy and educated communities, who are prepared to face the challenges of the future. Thus, the Pueblo has stressed the importance of education for all generations of the Pueblo. Ten years ago we created our own Department of Education and have worked to consolidate Laguna control over all stages of education from infancy to Grade 12. We have also worked to maintain a scholarship program for Lagunas who pursue higher education. Historically, other entities or governments have educated our children and we have had little control over the curriculum or cultural sensitivity of the school administration. We believe our children should be educated in a manner that enhances who they are as part of people long connected to this land and proud of their heritage and community-centered values.

*For far too long, our members have been subjected to school curricula and systems*

that emphasize individualism and work against the community values we hold so important to our existence.

In conclusion, we ask that, as you do the work to which the Permanent Forum has been called, you listen to the words of indigenous people who can tell you about the importance of self-determination to our communities. You have a mandate to address indigenous issues relating to many aspects of our lives—economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights<sup>22</sup>—to provide recommendations to the Economic and Social Council. We ask that you take on the challenge of deepening your understanding of the connectedness of land, water and our ways of life. Last, we urge you to pay attention to the importance of empowering indigenous peoples to exercise more control in the education of their communities, and thereby preparing new generations of leadership.

Thank you and we wish you well in the work you have been called to do.