

PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

First Session

Closing statement by the Chairperson of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues – Mr. Ole Henrik Magga



New York, 24 May, 2002

Indigenous representatives, governmental delegates, representatives of the UN agencies, and, foremost, fellow members of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, allow me to extend my gratitude to you all for your tremendous cooperation during the past two weeks of hard work. In particular, allow me to thank all the participants whose interventions I - due to time constraints - had to cut short, for your understanding. Please know that I am aware of that the views and concerns that you wanted to share with us are of greatest importance, and my heart is with you for your suffering. Regrettably, however, we only have so much time at our disposals. Thanks to all of you, I dare call the first session of the Permanent Forum has been a success.

And, indeed, it is of utmost importance that the Permanent Forum becomes a success. It is evident from the testimonies that we have listened to during the past two weeks that indigenous peoples remain among the most marginalized in the world. It gave me great pleasure to hear the Secretary General acknowledge this fact in his address to the Forum earlier today. Many of us face hardships that few - if any - other peoples have to sustain. We continue to suffer from the wrongdoings of the past, when our territories were colonized and our voices went unheard. Even worse, in many cases, the discrimination and mistreatment continues. Our peoples are among the poorest of the poor. Our children are among the most undereducated. They are under constant threat to be assimilated into the majority society. We are engaged in an ongoing battle for the continuous existence of our cultures. Our traditional lands, waters and natural resources are exploited for the purpose of capital gain, from which we rarely get to benefit. Our human rights are constantly violated. Our languages are dying out. My thoughts go to Chief Marie Smith Jones, the last remaining speaker of her language - still so strong in spirit. Again, I would like to thank her for sharing her thoughts with us on Wednesday.

Like Chief Marie Smith Jones, we must continue to stand tall. We must never give up our fight for equality and justice. None of our peoples should have to pass away, knowing that a substantial part of their culture dies with them. That we owe to ourselves and to those who pass away without seeing the Permanent Forum come true. I am grateful to all my indigenous brothers and sisters that have come to share with us your concerns and needs, despite that many of you had to make huge sacrifices to be able to be here today. I am even more grateful to those of you that have given us concrete and insightful recommendations on how to remedy the

problems that our peoples are facing. I think you all agree when I say that in order for this Permanent Forum to become a true vehicle for the advocacy of indigenous rights, it is essential that we remain action orientated, that we focus on the solutions rather on the problems. At the next session, I expect even more delegates to give us concrete advice for future actions in their statements.

I am grateful to the governmental delegates and the representatives of the UN agencies that have participated at the first session of the Permanent Forum, that have joined the indigenous peoples in our struggle for equality and justice. I would like to thank you all for having engaged in a concrete and fruitful dialogue with the Forum members and other participants regarding how to improve the life situation of indigenous peoples. It has given me great pleasure to see the Forum members, representatives of the agencies, and state representatives, discuss how in partnership we can address the needs and concerns of our peoples. As stated already at the opening of this Forum, to me it constitutes a historical event that for the first time, indigenous peoples and governments meet on a truly equal basis, and together address our mutual concerns. For too long time has the international community failed to recognize that only by working together, can the wrongdoings of the past against indigenous peoples - and those that continue to occur - be finally remedied. Past experiences shows that without the equal, full, and effective participation by the indigenous peoples themselves, it is not possible adequately address the particular needs of concerns of our peoples.

The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues symbolizes a new kind of partnership between indigenous peoples and governments, and it is of extreme importance that the Permanent Forum becomes a success. Therefore, it has given me great pleasure to hear that the Forum members, indigenous representatives, governmental delegates and agency representatives stand united in a commitment to make the Permanent Forum truly permanent.

I am, however, deeply concerned over that as we walk out of this room, the Permanent Forum members stand empty-handed. The Permanent Forum has not yet been equipped with its own secretariat. We have recommended that such a secretariat be established in New York, directly linked to the secretariat of ECOSOC, and funded through the UN regular budget. Until such a secretariat has been established, we need the continuous support from all of you. I plead to all states, organizations and other interested parties to provide the Permanent Forum with adequate financial support. I further plead for your support so that in the next biannual budget, the Permanent Forum is funded through the United Nations regular budget. Make sure that we can work effectively, so that indigenous peoples are not again left with empty words. Please demonstrate that the international community is serious in putting and end to - and remedy - the past and present wrongdoings against our peoples. Please do not let the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues become another example of discrimination against indigneous peoples, as the only UN body not provided with regular funding.

Allow me to conclude with a traditional song from my own home area.
[Traditional Saami song with explanation]

Once again, thank you all. Leave strong in spirit. I am looking forward to continue to work with you during the year to come and to see you all at the second session of the Permanent Forum.