

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**

**REMARKS TO CLOSING SESSION OF THE FIRST SESSION  
OF THE PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES**

**New York, 24 May 2002**

Mr. President, [of ECOSOC]  
Members of the Permanent Forum,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address this historic first session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Let me start by congratulating the Chairperson, Mr. Ole-Henrik Magga, and the other members, on their election to this important new United Nations body.

On the first day of your session last week, the President of the Economic and Social Council greeted you with the words, "Welcome to the United Nations family". I would like to reiterate that sentiment, and say to all the world's indigenous peoples: "You have a home at the United Nations".

Indeed, you have rights, needs and aspirations that can and must be addressed by the world Organization. And you have knowledge, vision, values, skills and many other attributes that can and must help us at the United Nations, and indeed all of humankind, to achieve our long-sought goals of development and peace.

Just 20 years ago, indigenous peoples began attending the first sessions of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations.

Since then, you have helped to draft a comprehensive declaration of rights that is now under consideration by governments.

You have brought vital new issues to the agendas of UN bodies in the areas of traditional knowledge, sustainable development, environmental custodianship, and collective rights.

You were a dynamic presence at the Earth Summit in Rio ten years ago, and an articulate voice one year later at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, where the proposal for a Permanent Forum was first discussed.

And thanks to your active presence last year in Durban, the World Conference against Racism adopted many important recommendations relating to indigenous peoples.

With the inauguration of this Forum, indigenous issues assume their rightful place – higher on the international agenda than ever before. We begin a new chapter in the history of indigenous peoples at the United Nations. It is entirely appropriate that as victims of discrimination, and as some of the world's poorest of the poor, indigenous peoples have a platform where they can raise their concerns.

In a relatively short time, indigenous peoples have covered considerable ground. But of course, there is a great distance still to be travelled. As you conclude the Forum's first session, I would like to congratulate you on the start you have made in charting those difficult waters.

Indeed, your Forum has formidable responsibilities. You must determine how best to mobilize the expertise and resources of the UN system. You will need to forge new relationships between indigenous communities and specialized agencies. And you will have to convince Governments that they must join these efforts and increase the attention they pay to indigenous issues.

You will also have to consider what role you can play in pursuit of wider United Nations objectives. Almost two years ago, at the Millennium Summit here in New York, Member States established the Millennium Development Goals as a template for a major effort to combat poverty. The World Summit on Sustainable Development is also fast approaching, at which we hope to reinvigorate our work to promote prosperity while living in harmony with the global environment. It is unthinkable that the world's indigenous peoples – who have so much to contribute -- would not be part of these and similar efforts for the common good.

For my part, I have asked the heads of all United Nations organizations to consider how they can contribute to the success of this Forum. And as you know, an Inter-agency Support Group has been established to assist you.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The world's indigenous people are remarkably diverse – as groups and as individuals. But there are strong bonds of solidarity and historical grievance. Many also have a deep and abiding reverence for the natural world. And many place great emphasis on spiritual practices. Among the traditions I find particularly powerful is the respect given to elders as carriers of wisdom, to women as carriers of language and culture, and to children as carriers of the identity that is transmitted to future generations.

Indigenous peoples make up an estimated one of every 20 members of the human family. I have no doubt that as new members of the United Nations family, you will make an immense contribution to the Organization's mission of peace and progress. On behalf of the UN family, I would like to pledge our strong commitment to your cause and your concerns.

Thank you very much.