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Agenda Item (f): Education

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On behalf of

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Thank you, Mr. Chairperson,

Yesterday morning you heard of human rights violations against indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. Under such oppressive circumstances, our peoples realized that we could not defend our rights without education. Now maybe you will understand why one of our leaders told us: "Your houses can be burnt down, your lands can be taken away, but your education cannot be taken away."

In some areas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the primary school-teachers go without salaries, and receive just food and, where appropriate, accommodation, and of course, an opportunity to serve their community. The basic expenses of the school are met from contributions of households putting aside a fistful of rice every day. In some places, very young indigenous children walk up and down steep mountain slopes for hours everyday to attend school. In many other places, children paddle their dugout canoes to school. However, most of these children do not get the opportunity to study beyond the primary stage, since their parents cannot afford to send their children away. In most districts of the region, literacy was estimated in 1991 to be below the national average of 35%. In the case of most of the indigenous peoples it was far lower. We do not know the exact situation because the census does not process data along ethnic lines, another common difficulty for indigenous peoples worldwide.

The situation in northwestern Bangladesh, although not in a remote location, is in some instances even worse. It was estimated in census year of 1991 that the literacy rate of one of the indigenous people was only about 9%. The same community was also suffering from landlessness, which was estimated at 85%. The number of university graduates among these people can be counted in the fingers of the hand.

Thus we see that both remoteness and poverty can be factors that limit educational development. Although these are difficult obstacles, they can be overcome. Thus, where the number of students is small, we have established one teacher schools. Where the indigenous farmers' and their children's field and home chores interfere with the regular school timings, we have re-set the school hours to fit in with the chore timings. Where possible we have tried to maintain our community forests to support the school through the sustainable marketing of forests resources. However, our resources are not enough. We therefore need support from government agencies, NGOs and UN agencies. And in this, the most important pre-requisite is for the governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental agencies to educate themselves of the diverse situations of our communities in order to amend the concerned policies to provide state and other support. Thereby, the policy-makers will realize, that they were actually being discriminatory against our peoples, not so much because of a conscious negative feeling towards us, but because of lack of

knowledge about our situations, which prevented them from doing what is necessary to make oft-cited "education for all" a reality for indigenous peoples as well.

However, we need special attention not only at the primary level, but also at secondary and tertiary levels, through the establishment of schools, colleges and universities in our regions. The government provides a quota for admission into some educational institutions, but they are not applied in a fair manner, and are quite inadequate for our numbers.

Another obstacle towards education is the requirement of having to study in the national Bengali language – which is not the mother tongue of the indigenous peoples. We feel that if we start off with our mother tongues at school, we will both protect our language and learn the national language better, in a phased manner. This is supported by the CHT Accord of 1997, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the ILO Conventions 107, both ratified.

The situations from Bangladesh that I have described perhaps provide us some lessons that may be appropriate for many other indigenous peoples' regions and territories as well. We therefore draw this Forum's attention to the following:

- To encourage governments to revise their education policies to enable special measures for the establishment of state-run educational institutions in indigenous peoples' regions;
- To encourage governments to introduce primary education in the mother tongue of indigenous peoples;
- To make it obligatory for primary school teachers to be able to speak the mother tongue of the students concerned;
- To involve UNESCO and UNICEF in taking integrated programmes on education in areas inhabited by indigenous peoples.