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UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

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Agenda Item 3: Substantive Theme - Indigenous Women

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Thank you, Mr. Chairperson, for giving me this opportunity to address the Permanent Forum on this year's substantive theme - **Indigenous Women**.

Distinguished delegates, indigenous sisters and brothers.

Traditional indigenous societies are free, liberal and honest. Women are equal to men in terms of enjoyment of rights and freedoms in most of the indigenous societies. They are highly respected in society. They participate in activities ranging from household works to economic development and political decision-making. In some cases, for example the Maasai indigenous people in Africa, elderly women play the role of a mediator in conflict-resolution. Indigenous women significantly contribute to economic substantiality in their societies. They are the actual bearers and holders of rich indigenous traditions, culture and social values.

Indigenous women's issues cannot be addressed in alienation of the problems faced by their group or people under colonial states. Colonial states snatch away the sovereignty, rights and freedoms of indigenous peoples with the occupation of indigenous territories and lands. It constitutes the fundamental problems of indigenous peoples.

In many countries, like Bangladesh, there is no legislation or constitutional safeguard for protection of indigenous peoples. The government of Bangladesh does not even acknowledge the existence of any indigenous peoples in the country. The report (CERD/C/379/Additional 1 dated 30 May 2000) on elimination of all forms of racial discrimination submitted by Bangladesh to the **UN Committee on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination** in 2000 says,

"Bangladesh's geographic location and history have made it a home to people of diverse origins, races, colours and descent. The assimilative character of Bengal civilization combined with the intermingling of inhabitants with occasional waves of immigration have resulted in a composite society which has racially and culturally turned into a melting pot over the millennia. A variety of races including the Dravidians, the Mongoloids, the Negroids and the Aryans and their continuous intermingling have, therefore, contributed to a composite racial "mix" in such a way that categorical distinction of "race" or "ethnic origin" per se have ceased to exist for the Bangladeshi people. Race itself as an issue does not impinge on the consciousness or outlook of the Bangladeshi people in their intrasocial relations as they seek to find homogeneity in their identity through common language, tradition, culture, norms and harmony in tolerance and co-existence..."

The report distorts the history of the country now known as so-called Bangladesh. It identifies the people of the country as "Bengalis" and flatly denies having any "categorical distinction of 'race' or 'ethnic origin'" among them despite 45 distinct indigenous peoples living in various parts of the country over centuries and struggling for survival of their ethnic identity, language, culture and religion which are

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totally different from that of the majority Bengalis (88%). It justifies the classic policy of the government to integrate the indigenous peoples and their territories and resources with the Bengali nation-state. This policy locally known as “**Islamization**” encourages and sponsors population transfer, land grabbing, militarization, spread of Islam, exclusion from political and development processes against the indigenous peoples. Its political, economic, social and cultural impacts on the indigenous peoples are damaging and beyond imagination.

The government of Bangladesh is, of course, very liberal and progressive in advocating for early adoption of international declarations/conventions, such as the **UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**, on the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples and minorities at various international forums. However, the indigenous and tribal peoples and religious minorities in Bangladesh can never realize the taste of these conventions on the ground. It is a tragic irony.

The **CHT Accord** signed between the **Jumma** indigenous people of the **Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)** and the government of Bangladesh in 1997 recognizes limited autonomy for the indigenous people, but the government continues to non-comply with its obligation to the Accord. As a result, the fundamental terms of the Accord – such as settlement of land disputes between Jummas and Bengali settlers, rehabilitation of indigenous people affected in the conflict, withdrawal of more than 500 “temporary military and paramilitary camps” set up in the CHT during the conflict-period (from 1979 to early 1990s) to suppress the movement of the indigenous people etc. – remain unimplemented till today. The security forces of Bangladesh continue to practice human rights abuses including rape and torture against the indigenous women with complete impunity. 17 cases of rape/gang rape, 13 cases of attempt to rape and sexual harassment, one case of abduction, more than 60 cases of torture and dozen of cases of arbitrary detention against the indigenous women have been reported in the post-conflict CHT.

The government is considering passing a legislation providing reservation of one seat in the national parliament for women of each district. The legislation, if passed, would be a step forward to empowering women in Bangladesh. However, it provides reservation of only one seat for all women of the three hill districts including Bengali ones. So it is quite discriminatory and violates the **Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** to which Bangladesh is a party. The indigenous women’s organizations demanded reservation of one seat for indigenous women of each hill district according to the principle to be applicable in plain districts for Bengali women. Now the point to be seen is whether or not the government is going to meet this demand.

Indigenous women will continue to be subjected to violence, discrimination and exclusion until and unless indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination and the role of indigenous women in all decision-making processes within the indigenous community is recognized and respected. Indigenous women have the capacity and all potential to know what is right and what is wrong for them.

Therefore, Mr. Chairperson, my organization, **Peace Campaign Group**, would like to request you to recommend in your report making an international standard and national legislations on the rights of indigenous women based on the declarations of indigenous women, such as the **2nd Asian Indigenous Women Declaration, 2004**.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for your kind attention!