

Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
First session
Item 5 General Debate
New York 13 – 24 May 2002



Statement
by
Sven-Roald Nystø
President of the Saami Parliament in Norway

16 May 2002

Mr. Chairman
Distinguished Members of the Permanent Forum,
Excellencies,
Indigenous sisters and brothers,
Delegates

It is an great honor for me to address the first session of the Permanent Forum on behalf of the Saami Parliament in Norway. This day marks a milestone for countless individuals, indigenous and otherwise. First and foremost, I would like to congratulate the indigenous peoples of the world; This is indeed a milestone for all of us! Secondly, I would like to applaud all those who have worked so long and so hard and with such a sense of purpose to create a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

The Saami people live in four different countries: Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. Since time immemorial, the Saami have maintained contact with each other, even after borders were drawn up and the Saami territory was divided among four different states. Now the saami in Finland, Norway and Sweden each have their own elected bodies, the Saami parliaments. Recently, a joint body, the Saami Parliamentary Council, was established to facilitate collaboration between the Saami parliaments. The saami in Russia have observer status.

When discussing the process that lead to establishment of a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, mention should be made of the Sámiráđđi - the Saami Council, whose members played an active part in the process and had the courage and endurance to preserve their dreams and visions, as well as the fortitude to believe they would one day succeed. Every living culture depends on people who look to the future, that is, on those who dare to believe the impossible is possible.

However, courage, visions and dreams alone are not enough. Indigenous peoples are also dependent on the good offices of attentive, well-disposed authorities when indigenous issues are on the agenda. This also requires considerable courage and strength, not least in terms of moving in new directions.

Throughout its existence, the UN has worked to promote human rights and peace in every corner of world. The International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples began in 1994. Thus far, it has resulted in the establishment of a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The Saami Parliament is confident that this Forum will make a positive contribution to the work on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

I hope that all countries and UN bodies and agencies will support and promote the work of the Permanent Forum, so that it will become a smoothly functioning forum, allowing indigenous issues to be dealt with as propitiously and effectively as possible. Further, it is essential that UN bodies and agencies co-operate with the Permanent Forum, consulting the new forum unfailingly on all issues pertaining to indigenous peoples. The Permanent Forum must be included if the indigenous perspective is to be taken into account.

When it comes to the Permanent Forum's secretariat, the Saami viewpoint is clear: The Permanent Forum has a broad mandate that embraces a wide variety of cases. Accordingly, it is important not to link the secretariat solely to the question of human rights. It will therefore be important to establish a separate secretariat associated with ECOSOC in New York. Further, it is vital that sufficient funds be allocated to enable the forum to perform its duties to the best of its ability.

Setting up a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is not the culmination of a process, but rather the commencement of a process that will render indigenous peoples' issues visible at the UN in earnest. The Saami Parliament in Norway has great expectations regarding this work.

Many challenges lie ahead – for us. We have celebrated the inauguration of the Forum. Now we need to stand unit and start the work. I trust in our success. On behalf of the Saami Parliament in Norway, I will conclude by congratulating all of us on the establishment of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and by wishing you all the very best of luck with your further efforts and in and through the new Forum.

Thank you for your attention.