

Ainu Association of Sapporo

Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
First session
New York, 13-24 May 2002



It is a great honor for the Ainu Association of Sapporo to assist at the First session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Our Association would like to extend its appreciation to the Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations for making possible the participation of one of our representatives. We look forward to the meaningful cooperation between the Indigenous Experts and the State-nominated Experts in completing the mandate of the Forum.

On this auspicious occasion, we strongly recommend that the Permanent Forum open a discussion on the situation of Indigenous Peoples living in urban areas. The Ainu are of course concerned for the policies of assimilation and marginalization imposed by the majority. But as an Indigenous People from one of the most industrialized countries, we have seen a lot of our compatriots settle down in the urban centers in Japan for economic reasons. Most of them are from the countryside of Hokkaido. Because they are away from their native communities, it is difficult for us to be handed down our traditions from our elders.

At the same time, a new Japanese law offers Japanese people many occasions to learn our culture. This contradiction threatens the succession of our culture and tradition to Ainu descendants. The Japanese Government continues to proudly mention in their interventions at various UN conferences the enactment of its 1997 Act for the Protection and Promotion of Ainu Culture to show that it is taking effective measures to preserve Ainu Culture. In the same year, in accordance with this Act, a foundation was designated as a unique authorized body to carry out the services provided in the Act. The Foundation does not give preference to Ainu individuals or groups seeking to protect and promote our own culture, but has instead turned the provisions of the law into its own national project. This Foundation conducts projects according to the following four policies;

- 1) Promotion of comprehensive and practical research on the Ainu
- 2) Promotion of the Ainu Language
- 3) Promotion of Ainu Culture
- 4) Dissemination of Knowledge on Ainu Traditions

Concerning the "promotion of comprehensive and practical research on the Ainu", the Foundation subsidizes scientific research and publication. As the scientific and academic projects do not concern most Ainu, who themselves have dramatically less access to the education system in Japan, the benefits of the

Foundation are mostly destined for Japanese scholars. It is similar with regard to the "promotion of the Ainu language". The Ainu language courses are open to all Ainu and Japanese who wish to learn the Ainu language. Most Ainu, however, who eke out a bare existence on their low salaries, do not have the time or resources to join the Ainu language courses. In the end, the language courses have only Japanese students. Moreover, the Foundation organizes many cultural events and offers Japanese spectators free access. At these events, Ainu have to sing and dance in order to show them a part of our culture under the name of "promoting" Ainu culture. As a result, there are very few Ainu who benefit from any of the measures provided under this Act.

In the five years since the enactment of this Act, we have come to feel that our culture is being *Japanized* as our people become more and more marginalized. Our homeland was taken away long ago. Now, it seems as if the Japanese government has set its sights on taking away our culture and traditions. We see this cultural invasion as a new form of colonization.

Finally, we would like to express our dissatisfaction with the location of the first session of the Permanent Forum in New York. We hope the Permanent Forum will take place in Geneva in the future.