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UNITED NATIONS WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

11th SESSION

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

22nd JULY - 30th AUGUST 1993

AGENDA ITEM No 5: "REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENTS"

STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION
ABORIGINAL EDUCATION CONSULTATIVE GROUPS

DELIVERED BY BONI ROBERTSON

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MADAM CHAIRMAN, DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS OF THE WORKING GROUP, INDIGENOUS BROTHERS AND SISTERS, AND REPRESENTATIVES OF GOVERNMENTS,

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK ON BEHALF OF THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION CONSULTATIVE GROUPS.

HAVING WITNESSED FIRST HAND THE HARD WORK AND COMMITMENT THAT THE WORKING PARTY AND INDIGENOUS DELEGATES HAVE PUT INTO FORMALISING THE DRAFT DECLARATION UNDER YOUR LEADERSHIP, CAN I EXPRESS OUR MOST SINCERE RESPECT AND ADMIRATION NOT ONLY FOR THE CONTENTS OF THE DOCUMENT ITSELF, BUT FOR THE DEDICATION THAT YOURSELF, AND MEMBERS OF THE WORKING GROUP AND THE DELEGATES THEMSELVES HAVE DEMONSTRATED TO ENSURE THAT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES EVERYWHERE ENJOY THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS.

MADAM CHAIR, THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION CONSULTATIVE GROUPS, CREATED TO PROVIDE COMMUNITY BASED ADVICE ON MATTERS PERTAINING TO INDIGENOUS EDUCATION TO STATE AND COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENTS, WOULD LIKE TO OFFER A STATEMENT TO THIS FORUM ABOUT THE CURRENT SITUATION THAT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES FACE WITH REGARDS TO EDUCATION.

AS A NETWORK OF COMMUNITY BASED ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES, THE FEDERATION STRIVES TOWARD THE ACHIEVEMENT OF EQUITABLE AND ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION FOR OUR PEOPLE. FUNDAMENTAL TO THIS, IS THE PROVISION OF CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE CURRICULUM, TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES, IMPLEMENTED IN A CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE ENVIRONMENT.

WHILE THE FEDERATION HAS THE UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION AS A BIRTH TO DEATH CONCEPT, IT BELIEVES THAT EDUCATION FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES IS NOT A PRIVILEGE, BUT A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT.

IN THE LAST TWELVE MONTHS, WE HAVE WITNESSED THE CONCLUSION OF THE FIRST TRIENNIUM OF THE NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION POLICY. (HEREAFTER REFERRED TO AS THE AEP) AND THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND.

THE AEP IS BASED ON A SET OF GOALS AND EDUCATIONAL PRINCIPLES THAT HAVE BEEN ENDORSED BY ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT IN AUSTRALIA, AND ARE UNDERPINNED BY COMMONWEALTH LEGISLATION IN THE FORM OF THE ABORIGINAL/EDUCATION SUPPLEMENTARY (AESIP) ACT 1989.

THE AEP HAS PRIMARY GOALS WHICH ENCOMPASS ALL SECTORS OF EDUCATION. THESE GOALS ARE:

- 1) TO INCREASE THE INVOLVEMENT OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT PEOPLE IN EDUCATIONAL DECISION MAKING;
- 2) TO ENSURE THE EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES IN EDUCATION;
- 3) TO ENABLE EQUITABLE AND APPROPRIATE EDUCATION OUTCOMES FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES.

MADAM CHAIR, TO SAY THAT INITIATIVES HAVE BEEN TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES OVER THE PAST 205 YEARS, IS NOT QUESTIONABLE.

HOWEVER BEING MINDFUL OF THE CURRENT EXPERIENCES OF OUR PEOPLE IN MANY REGARDS, THE FEDERATION ASKS THE QUESTION, HAS ANYTHING REALLY CHANGED?.

THE APPALLINGLY HIGH INCARCERATION RATES, THE UNACCEPTABLE LEVELS OF UNEMPLOYMENT, AND THE MINIMAL PARTICIPATION OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN A TRUE AND MEANINGFUL MANNER, DETERMINES THAT THERE IS STILL MUCH TO BE ADDRESSED.

COLLECTIVELY, AUSTRALIANS MUST ACKNOWLEDGE LEGISLATIVE PROVISIONS THAT HAVE DENIED ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FORUMS THAT HAVE AFFECTED THEIR RIGHT TO SELF DETERMINATION AND AUTONOMY.

INDEED, THE ACT OF SELF DETERMINATION IN ITSELF, PRESUPPOSES THE RIGHT OF ALL PEOPLE TO CONTROL THEIR OWN DESTINIES AND TO PARTICIPATE IN BROADER SOCIAL STRUCTURES WITHOUT PREJUDICE OR BIAS.

THE FEDERATION IS DETERMINED THAT THIS SENTIMENT IS VITALLY IMPORTANT TO THE PARTICIPATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM, AND BEFORE ANY SUBSTANTIAL CHANGE CAN BE WITNESSED THERE ARE SIGNIFICANT ISSUES THAT MUST BE ADDRESSED.

A) ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES MUST BE AFFORDED THE RIGHT TO TRUE AND MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN THE EDUCATION FOR THEIR CHILDREN AND ABOUT THEIR CULTURES.

B) OUR CHILDREN AND OUR COMMUNITIES MUST BE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE FULLY IN AN EDUCATION SYSTEM WHEREBY THE PHILOSOPHIES AND VALUES REFLECT THOSE THAT ARE PERTINENT TO ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURES.

C) OUR CHILDREN AND OUR COMMUNITIES MUST BE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE EQUITABLY IN AN EDUCATION SYSTEM WHEREBY THE CURRICULUM IN SCHOOLS IS UNBIASED AND NON DISCRIMINATORY IN CONTENT AND DELIVERY, AND WHERE THE TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES ARE REFLECTIVE OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER APPROACHES TO EDUCATION, KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING.

D) THERE MUST BE GREATER RESPECT PAID TO THE INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTION OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES IN THE ACADEMIC ARENA, AND OUR CHILDREN MUST SEE REFLECTED IN THE EYES OF THEIR PEERS, THEIR TEACHERS AND THE BROADER COMMUNITY, A POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT OF, AND RESPECT FOR, WHO THEY ARE AS INDIVIDUALS, AND FOR THE CULTURAL GROUP TO WHICH THEY BELONG.

E) ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES SHOULD BE DEVELOPED IN CO-OPERATION WITH INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS AND IMPLEMENTED AS INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM AT ALL LEVELS OF EDUCATION. SUCH ACTION WOULD NOT ONLY CONTRIBUTE SIGNIFICANTLY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CROSS CULTURAL RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING BUT JUST AS IMPORTANTLY WOULD EDUCATE NON-INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS ABOUT THE TRUE HISTORY OF AUSTRALIA AND ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT HISTORIES, CULTURES AND IDENTITIES.

THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ABORIGINAL EDUCATION POLICY WILL GO A LONG WAY TO HELPING THESE PROCESSES OCCUR.

MADAM CHAIR, THE FEDERATION BELIEVES THAT THE GOVERNMENT OF AUSTRALIA AND THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY AT LARGE, ARE AT A CROSS ROADS IN THEIR ATTEMPTS TO REDRESS THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES IN THIS REGARD.

WHILE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM HAS BEEN USED AS A VEHICLE TO PERPETUATE MANY OF THE INJUSTICES EXPERIENCED BY ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES IN THE PAST, THE FEDERATION BELIEVES, THAT THIS SAME VEHICLE CAN NOW BE USED TO RECTIFY AND MEND THOSE BARRIERS THAT HAVE DENIED OUR PEOPLE TRUE AND MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN AUSTRALIA SOCIETY.

NEVER BEFORE HAS THE EDUCATION SYSTEM BEEN SO IMPORTANT AS IT WILL BE IN HELPING TO ACHIEVE THE GOALS OF THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS, AND IN HELPING AUSTRALIA GENERALLY, TO COME TO TERMS WITH THE TRUE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECENTLY ANNOUNCED HIGH COURT DECISION ON NATIVE LAND TITLES.

BOTH OF THESE ISSUES ARE OF VITAL IMPORTANCE TO ALL AUSTRALIANS AS WE APPROACH THE YEAR 2000.

MADAM CHAIRMAN, IT IS WITH GREAT PLEASURE THAT THE FEDERATION OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION CONSULTATIVE GROUPS NOTE THAT EDUCATION HAS BEEN ADDRESSED IN THE DRAFT DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES.

THE FEDERATION BELIEVES THAT THE REFERENCES MADE TO EDUCATION IN THE TEXT SHOULD PROVIDE THE CATALYST FOR CHANGE IN THE CONCERNS THAT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES HAVE WITH REGARDS TO EDUCATION FOR THEIR CHILDREN AND THEIR COMMUNITIES.

MADAM CHAIRMAN, I HAVE INDICATED A NUMBER CONCERNS THAT THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION CONSULTATIVE GROUPS HAS WITH REGARDS TO EDUCATION FOR OUR PEOPLE.

MADAM CHAIRMAN, IF WE ARE TO WITNESS REAL CHANGE, IT IS IMPORTANT THAT ALL AUSTRALIANS TAKE UP THE CHALLENGE SO THAT WE MAY EVIDENCE FAIR AND EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES IN SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS SUCH AS THE EDUCATION SYSTEM AND IN SOCIETY AT LARGE.

IF SUCH ACTION IS NOT TAKEN, THEN THE PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, THE AIMS OF THE ABORIGINAL EDUCATION POLICY AND THE GOALS OF THE RECONCILIATION STRATEGY WILL BE NOTHING OTHER THAN RHETORIC, DEVOID OF ANY SUBSTANTIAL COMMITMENT OR MEANING. THE FEDERATION IS COMMITTED TO WORKING WITH GOVERNMENTS AND

INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS TO MAKE SURE THAT THIS
DOES NOT OCCUR.

IN CONCLUSION MADAM CHAIRMAN, I WOULD LIKE TO THANK YOU ON BEHALF
OF THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION CONSULTATIVE
GROUPS FOR ALLOWING ME THE TIME TO SHARE WITH THE FORUM THIS
ADDRESS.

THANK YOU