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TORRES STRAIT REGIONAL AUTHORITY

**THE PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
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NEW YORK**

**ADDRESS BY
THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE TORRES STRAIT REGIONAL AUTHORITY
MR TERRY WAIA**

Distinguished Members of the Permanent Forum
Indigenous Members of the World
Ladies and Gentlemen

My name is Terry Waia and I have previously attended the WGIP sessions as a representative of the people of the Torres Strait. Today, I am again proud to stand here as Chairperson of the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA), a statutory body established in 1994 by the Australian Parliament. Our goal is to improve the quality of life of indigenous people in our region and I hope to share some of our experiences with all of you.

The Torres Strait stretches 150 kilometres from the north-eastern tip of the Australian mainland to the coast of Papua New Guinea. It is the home to my people, the Torres Strait Islanders, who are of Melanesian origin. Our population of 8,000 are spread across 17 island communities. It is a unique region, because it is the only part of Australia that shares an international border.

Greater Autonomy

On previous occasions I have spoken about our push for greater autonomy. Our people are striving to gain more control over issues affecting our region and more decision making power. The establishment of the TSRA in 1994 was in itself a step towards greater autonomy as the TSRA is made up of island community chairpersons, who together make decisions on issues that will affect the future of our region. The current framework allows us to negotiate directly with both the Australian Commonwealth and Queensland Ministers on key matters, but we feel it is time to take this arrangement a step further and broaden our input and decision-making ability to areas that directly affect our people in terms of service delivery and resource control.

ownership which fuelled the Mabo Case also drives the Torres Strait greater autonomy movement, because how can you control your resources if you are not recognised as its owners?

In my last address to the WGIP, I outlined our progress in the area of native title since the Mabo Decision in 1992. With the TSRA's assistance and representation, through our Native Title Office, eight determinations have been made in the Torres Strait over the last decade. We continue to assist claimants from other islands with their determination process and the Torres Strait continues to be recognised by governments as one of the leading areas for native title determinations in Australia.

Gaining recognition of land continues to present challenges for our people, but the task of managing our lands, once determinations are handed down is presenting a new set of challenges that we must face and overcome.

In November 2001, the TSRA on behalf of the Torres Strait people lodged a regional sea claim over the waters of the Torres Strait. Our claim will aim to extend the native title rights of our people to our sea country and complement our political move to gain control of our fisheries resources.

Economic Development

Our portfolio of business loans currently contains 104 TSRA business funding loans, valued at \$3.2 million. There are also 37 housing loans valued at \$4.3 million. The scheme is providing our people with opportunities to explore private enterprise and learn about developing a business. Our vision, is to foster initiative within our communities that will generate profits which stay in the Torres Strait and allow us to control our lives at the individual, as well as regional level. Autonomy begins with each and every Torres Strait Islander, because controlling our personal destiny places us collectively in a better position to reach and benefit from greater autonomy.

Infrastructure Development

The Torres Strait Islands communities are remote with many located closer to Papua new Guinea than to mainland Australia. The facilities, services and infrastructure on these islands are below the standard of those existing in towns on the mainland. However, the TSRA is working to change this through the implementation of a number of infrastructure programs designed to improve the quality of life of our people.

Conclusion

I am grateful for this opportunity to share the aspirations, experiences and achievements of the Torres Strait people with our indigenous brothers and sisters from around the world. I stand proud that I am able to represent my people at this Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples.

Thank you.