

UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sub-Commission on Prevention of
Discrimination and Protection Minorities
Working Group on Indigenous Populations
Fifth Session, August 3-7, 1987
Geneva

WGIP 87/CIR/1

STATEMENT BY THE INUIT CIRCUMPOLAR CONFERENCE

Presentation by:
Mary Simon
President

Madame Chairperson, Working Group members, indigenous delegates and observers, thank you for this opportunity to address the Fifth Session of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations.

The Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) is an international organization currently based in Canada. Our members are made up of Inuit from Alaska, Greenland and northern Canada. Since 1983, the ICC has enjoyed non-governmental organization (NGO) status at the United Nations.

The main thrust of our presentation today is to emphasize the importance of the Working Group and its consideration of international principles. We feel there is an urgent need for more attention at the international level to the fundamental rights, status and concerns of indigenous peoples.

Even within developed countries such as Canada and the United States, recognition of and respect for the fundamental rights of aboriginal peoples too often falls far short of an acceptable standard. Moreover, an alarming gap continues to widen between indigenous and non-indigenous communities within our countries.

We in North America do not have the hunger and starvation that persistently confront indigenous and other communities in

many developing countries. However, our most basic rights to land and resources are in many instances excessively restricted. The exercise of self-government is in practice often denied. Our local and regional economies generally resemble more closely those of a developing country, rather than the relatively wealthy nations within whose borders our communities, lands and waters are found.

In regard to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), crucial problems remain concerning land, self-government and subsistence. Former Justice Thomas Berger of Canada, sole Commissioner of the Alaska Native Review Commission, which was sponsored by the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, will be reporting his official findings to the Working Group at this Session.

In Greenland, the Home Rule Government continues to be an impressive, positive precedent. Meaningful forms of government among aboriginal peoples are indeed attainable if accompanied by commitment, dedication and political will by all parties involved. However, questions relating to non-renewable resources in Greenland still require resolution. In the area of renewable resources the lack of access by the people of Qaanaaq, in North Greenland, to their traditional hunting territories in Canada's Arctic islands must be satisfactorily resolved.

In Canada, aboriginal and treaty rights were recognized and affirmed in Canada's Constitution in 1982. This was rightfully viewed as a major and historic first step in the process. Since 1982 a series of First Ministers Conferences took place to elaborate upon these rights, and in particular, those of self-government. However, further elaborations of native rights in the Constitution have not been achieved.

Inuit and other aboriginal peoples of Canada are especially concerned with the constitutional amendments that are now taking place, as a follow-up to a June 1987 Accord entered into by Canada's First Ministers. These constitutional provisions will have far-reaching consequences for aboriginal peoples, but our requests for direct involvement in the process have been rejected and ignored. Further key reforms are to be undertaken, at least on an annual basis, through an entrenched process of First Ministers Conferences on the Constitution and on the Economy. This highly significant process will shape key aspects of Canada's future. However, the vital participation of aboriginal peoples has again not been secured.

The purpose of raising these examples is not to single out any government for criticism. We fully appreciate that this Working Group is not the appropriate forum to bring forward complaints. Rather, we wish to clearly illustrate the nature and scope of our problems and some of our priority concerns. Based on our collective experiences, we seek to work closely with

indigenous and government representatives so that internationally-recognized standards relating to our status and rights may be readily achieved.

To date, our rights as Inuit have not been adequately recognized. Too often, we do not have sufficient control in dealing with our extensive circumpolar interests. Still, we are taking the initiative to devise coherent and comprehensive policies for our northern regions. We are convinced that the most significant contributions we can make to our respective countries are based on our own aboriginal perspectives and values. We feel our input as Inuit can be further enhanced through cooperation and good will at regional, national and international levels.

Currently, the ICC is working on an Inuit Regional Conservation Strategy (IRCS) to implement the World Conservation Strategy (WCS) in Arctic regions. To our knowledge, the IRCS will be the world's first transnational strategy to implement the WCS. It will also be the first such strategy by an indigenous people.

The IRCS will provide for a comprehensive management regime based upon sustainable development of resources. The ICC has undertaken to inform the United Nations Environment Program of the main objectives of the IRCS, and how they relate to many aspects of the UNEP program and policies.

Consistent with the principles of sustainable development, the Bruntland Report -- The Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (April 1987), highlights the relationship of aboriginal people to their homeland and the importance of this relationship to the health of the whole environment. It also emphasizes the need for participation in resource management, development and political decision making, and the relevance and continuation of indigenous institutions in this regard.

In addition, the ICC is working on the formulation of Arctic principles in major areas of domestic and foreign policy. Our aim is to devise an Arctic Policy which not only ensures recognition and respect for Inuit rights and interests, but also protects the human and other fundamental rights and freedoms of all northern peoples.

Fundamental principles in the categories of rights, peace, security, environmental, social, cultural, economic, educational and scientific issues have already been developed. While these principles are intended to apply to the North~~er~~ both now and in the future, they will not necessarily remain the same.

First, additions and improvements will continue to be made. Second, the basic principles and the Arctic Policy itself must always be seen as a "living" statement. In this regard, the ICC is intent on devising with others a flexible blueprint that will equitably reflect the changing economic, social and political circumstances and priorities in the circumpolar regions.

As part of our defence and arms control considerations, we are examining the feasibility of establishing a trans-boundary Arctic nuclear-weapons-free zone by international agreement or treaty.

In regard to defence matters, we are concerned that our ancestral circumpolar regions are rapidly being transformed by Arctic-rim governments into a new strategic military and combat zone for East-West confrontation and conflict. Arctic and global security, as well as world peace, could be put at great risk.

Rather than curb the growing threat of cruise missiles and other weapons systems in the North through intensified arms control efforts, expensive nuclear-powered attack submarines are now being seriously proposed.

In regard to the Declaration of Principles prepared through this Working Group, the ICC applauds the initiative to date. However, they fall short of the standards and principles that have been established by the ICC. Additional clarification and

elaboration is required in order for these principles to be consistent with our own policy development as Inuit. We hope that all of this work will eventually lead to world-wide recognition of an international covenant on the rights and status of indigenous peoples.

We are confident that the concerns of all governments can be accommodated. In the future, we would suggest that efforts be made to discuss and resolve any concerns prior to attendance at Working Group Sessions. Formal or informal consultations in this regard could take place between States and indigenous peoples within each country concerned.

While work proceeds towards an acceptable set of principles, the ICC proposes that specific references to indigenous peoples, in both developed and developing countries, be more systematically included in U.N. resolutions and other instruments. If only developing countries are emphasized in these documents, we run a grave risk that some governments in industrialized countries may feel less compelled to implement universal U.N. principles within their own border, in favor of aboriginal peoples.

The ICC is also strongly concerned about the revision process and current language of the International Labour Organization Convention 107. The partial revision of the Convention needs in-depth examination to determine the legal,

political and social implications for indigenous governments and peoples. We feel that it is necessary for indigenous peoples and their representatives to have a greater level of meaningful participation in the revision process. The ICC Executive Council will be discussing special NGO status within the ILO and a program for our review and analysis of Convention 107.

It would also be highly beneficial if the U.N. Declaration on the Right to Development (G.A. Resolution 41/128 of December 4, 1986) would be amended to include explicit reference to indigenous peoples. The General Assembly resolution should also clearly emphasize the applicability of this important Declaration to aboriginal peoples within developed nations, as well as Third World countries.

Similarly, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) should be reviewed with a view to proposing appropriate new provisions to promote the renewable resources economies of indigenous peoples. These and other ideas to assist aboriginal economic development at the international level were communicated to the Canadian government in September 1986. To date, we are still awaiting a response.

These types of specific measures that we are proposing for various U.N. forums and instruments should serve to increase the relevance of the United Nations to indigenous peoples. Such concrete actions would also help to advance the objectives of the

Working Group on Indigenous Populations and its quest for international standards.

Further, the ICC respectfully requests and encourages the United Nations to declare 1992 as the Year of the Indigenous Peoples of the World. This request is in direct response to ICC General Assembly Resolution 86-12. The year 1992 will mark the 500th anniversary of the dawning of awareness by Europeans of the existence of indigenous peoples in the Americas. We have requested Canada to introduce an appropriate resolution to this effect in the U.N. General Assembly, but we have not yet received a reply. We hope that we can count on the active support of the governments represented here today.

Establishing 1992 as the Year of Indigenous Peoples could serve to substantially increase international focus on aboriginal issues and concerns. It could also provide necessary impetus to the vital matters being dealt with by this valued Working Group.

We believe that international standards pertaining to the rights and status of indigenous peoples can eventually gain broad acceptance and support within the world community. Through such recognition of our distinct cultures and societies, we will also enhance and strengthen our respective nation-states. We would like to confirm the ongoing commitment and support of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference to these essential objectives.