

# Remarks by Aili Keskitalo, President of the Sami Parliament of Norway, 22 Sep. 2014, World Conference on Indigenous Peoples

**High-level plenary of the United Nations General Assembly, known as the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, Remarks by the President of the Sami Parliament of Norway**

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**Opening Plenary Session**

Bures, ja ollu giitu.

President of the General Assembly, Secretary General, Heads of States and Governments, Government and Indigenous Peoples delegations, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is indeed a great honor for me, as the President of the Sámi Parliament of Norway, to address the UN General Assembly on this historic occasion today – the opening of the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples. It has been a long journey for all of us, from December 2010 when the General Assembly decided that the World Conference should be held and till to today's opening of the World Conference. The arduous journey within the United Nations to promote and advance Indigenous Peoples' rights has been an inspirational one, and yet one that is grounded in pragmatism.

I sincerely thank all concerned who were involved in this process, particularly Indigenous Peoples in the seven indigenous regions, including the Indigenous Global Coordinating Group, and Member States, for their tireless efforts, their wisdom and their collaborative spirit. We have had challenges in the process, including with regard to Indigenous Peoples' participation, due to reasons related to the Rules of procedures, and other matters.

Today, my thoughts also go to those indigenous representatives who played an instrumental role in this process, but have since passed away. They were our siblings, our teachers, our parents, and our friends. Their contributions lie deep in our hearts, and we pay respect to their memories. I am sure that their spirits are with us during these momentous days.

Indigenous Peoples have been marginalized, discriminated against, ignored, but we have not lost heart, struggling for many decades, to September 2007, when the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was finally adopted by this apex world body. This was a historic milestone and a triumph for justice and human dignity. The challenge now remains to implement the provisions of the Declaration, by closing the gaps between theory and practice, between inspiration and reality, between commitment and implementation, between politics and good faith and sincerity. Every single Indigenous regional and thematic caucus has contributed to this process, drawing upon their respective struggles; to halt the ongoing usurpation of our lands, territories and resources, to eliminate discriminatory practices, sometimes aimed at destroying our cultures, to craft solutions to halt climate change to prevent the imposition of "development" models that destroy the life-giving capacities and integrity of Mother Earth, and to maintain our identities, cultures and dignity, and our

social and political integrity. One small city in the traditional Sami territory within Norway became the epicenter of the Indigenous Peoples' preparatory process, the Global Indigenous Preparatory Meeting, held in Alta, in June 2013. It was a gathering attended by approximately 600 Indigenous representatives from around the world, as well as some Governments, a gathering that my Parliament was honored to host.

The Alta Conference was momentous. It was the culmination, or the end result, of a process that started at the local and national levels, then went regional, and finally global. Indigenous Peoples from around world mobilized resources and support, and unanimously agreed on their common priorities.

The City of Alta is significant. This is where many of the leaders of the Sami "Kautokeino-Rebellion of 1852" were sentenced to death and executed. It is also the birthplace of Norway's modern indigenous policy; the dispute about the hydroelectric development of the Alta-Kautokeino watercourse in the 1980's highlighted the need to clarify the State's relationship to Sami people, including our legal position. This was the start of a process that led to the State's recognition of the Sami as an Indigenous People and the establishment of the Sami Parliament of Norway. Indigenous Peoples have been fighting for a very long time for being recognized as "peoples" under international law. As we know, Article 3 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples mirrors common Article 1 of the two international human rights covenants of 1966. The right to self-determination is a fundamental right of all peoples, which includes the right for peoples, to decide for themselves how they wish to engage with other peoples, and how they wish to engage with the international community. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes that Indigenous Peoples are free and equal to all other peoples, and that they have the right to be free from any kind of discrimination. We are not there yet, but we are slowly moving in the right direction.

I welcome that the outcome document of the World Conference recognizes the urgent need to ensure that Indigenous Peoples' representatives and their representative institution are able to participate at the United Nations on issues affecting them. Indigenous Peoples are ready to engage in discussions about how this can be achieved, and we look forward studying the Secretary General's report on this matter during the 70th session of the General Assembly. I believe that the process leading up to the World Conference has demonstrated that Indigenous Peoples make important contributions to the work of the United Nations. We are reliable partners that engage in at the work of the United Nations, and we do so in good faith, and expect the same in return from States and the United Nations.

Make no mistake; Indigenous Peoples are here to help strengthen societies, by advancing our collective rights, and the rights of our elders, women, youth, children, and disabled. When humankind harnesses the potential of Indigenous peoples, we will all be more harmonious, more successful, and more just. If there is anything we all in this great hall should learn from these last three years it is that the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and Member States, and the United Nations, can be a mutually respectful and beneficial one, when carried out in good faith and the spirit of cooperation.

Indigenous Peoples have suffered, and still do, from historic injustice, as the result of discrimination, colonization, invalid legal doctrines, dispossession of our lands, territories and

resources, preventing us from fully exercising our rights, including our right to development in accordance with our own needs and aspirations. This is why we work so hard to advocate for our rights.

A Sami proverb says that “the night is not so long that the day never comes”, which essentially means that all bad things will eventually come to an end. The adoption of the outcome document of the World Conference is a small, but yet an important step, towards the dawn of the day for Indigenous Peoples. What we have not achieved in this process, we will pursue in the future, at the national and international levels, with great determination, in the spirit of cooperation.

We are committed to continue to build a just and sustainable future for our future generations. We shall advocate for what matters in the lives of our peoples, including by increasing our efforts to start a new chapter of international cooperation that recognizes and advances our rights, while fully respecting the rights of others.

Mr. President,

This is the time when we have no other wiser choice, but to continue to work together, States, Indigenous Peoples, and other sectors of society. This is the time when we must persist in realizing our common aspirations, for human rights, justice, dignity, integrity, cultural identity, and a better future for the entire world community.

Ollu giitu – Thank You!