

STATEMENT BY THE
APACHE SURVIVAL COALITION

Working Group of Indigenous Populations

July 30, 1992

WGIP 92/NAM. USA/7

Thank you Madame Chair for giving me the opportunity to address the Working Group on Indigenous Populations today.

I am here to speak on behalf of the Apache Survival Coalition, a unique coalition of Apache people and environmentalists founded in 1991.

With respect to the limited time we have I will be as brief as possible, but will deliver detailed information to you attached to my statement.

The San Carlos Apache in Arizona, USA, are facing a severe threat to their right of free exercise of religion. In 1988 the Arizona-Idaho Conservation Act allowed the construction of three telescopes on top of Mount Graham, located within the traditional territory of the Apache. "Dzil nchaa si an" as we call the mountain has been a sacred place to the Apache people since time immemorial. The Apache people strongly oppose this destruction of their sacred mountain. Despite the fact that the approval of the observatory was based on fraudulent studies - as testified in congressional hearings in 1990 - the attempts of the Apache to halt construction of the telescopes have repeatedly been dismissed in court, again as recently as

June this year. The Apache Survival Coalition is currently in appealing process to finally gain justice in court.

Apache beliefs have not only been threatened but also been discriminated by the partners of the project, namely the University of Arizona, the Vatican, the Italian Arcetri Observatory and the German Max-Planck-Institute.

To further their concerns directly to them members of the Apache Survival Coalition and spritual leaders of the San Carlos Apache travelled to Europe in May this year to personally inform the project partners about their concerns. But they were denied meetings with the Pope and the president of the Arcetri Observatory. Whereas the Italian partners as well as the University of Arizona were continuously neglecting Apache beliefs and traditions, the Max-Planck-Institute went even further and in a meeting with opponents to the telescopes openly stated that the Apache don't have the right to decide themselves what is sacred to them. The gross insensitivity of the MPI urged members of the German parliament to express their deep concern about the violation of religious rights and of basic environmental U.S.laws. and were very upset about the behaviour of a so far prestigious institute.

Madame chair, the protection of cultural and religious rights is of crucial importance to indigenous people, and we appreciate

the dedication of the Working Group to include these rights in the draft declaration. However, the right of Native Americans to free exercise of religion, imbedded e.g. in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, is null and void, if the indigenous people are denied to decide what is sacred to them and therefore face violation of their rights.

The project partners are not only discriminating Apache beliefs and traditions, but they are also insulting Apache identity.

In spring this year the consortium started another propaganda campaign to deliberately discriminate opponents to the project and to misinform the public about the observatory and the procedure of its approval.

Madame Chair, the Apache people are fighting for their own cultural survival and the protection of their sacred mountain. But they are not only fighting for their own rights, but the very right of religious freedom is at stake.

Thank you for your attention.

Edison Cassadore