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U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations

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SPEECH FROM THE LOKONO INDIAN OF SURINAM.

When the Spaniards Pinzon and Hojeda tried to force their way into present-day Surinam in 1499, they were driven back to the sea within a short time. The French, the English and the Dutch, however, alternately succeeded in occupying Surinam in the 17th century by committing the most atrocious crimes. In the year 1667, the Dutch became the permanent occupying power. After nine years, this occupying power signed a peace treaty in which the conditions of their residence are stated. It is a grave situation because the Dutch Government did not consult us, the original and legitimate inhabitants of Surinam, at the transfer of sovereignty in 1975.

Five tribes of indigenous people are now living in Surinam; the Kalinjas and Lokonos being the largest among them and also the most deeply intergrated in the Surinam community. The long-term warfare between the occupying colonial power and our people have forced the government to acknowledge our right to live in Surinam. This basic right, however, has never been translated into law, which means that the Surinam government can at any time have at their disposal the soil upon which our ancestors have lived for centuries. This has been confirmed by the following events:

-During the Second World War, Surinam bauxite was of great importance to the allied powers. American troops were encamped in Surinam to protect the bauxite mines. The village of Bisri had to be removed for the construction of Zanderij Airport. Neither financial compensation nor a new place to live was offered.

-During the sixties, Pierre Kondre was almost completely parcelled out by the political authorities in Paramaribo.

-Washabo, Apura and Sektion, three indigenous villages in the western part of Surinam, no longer exist because they were forced to move for the Western Surinam Project, a development project that failed entirely. The area in question has been claimed by the forest again.

The relative quietness in which we seemed to live was destroyed violently in October 1986.

A former guard of Surinam's strong man attacked our villages along the border of French Guyana with his "Jungle Commando". The same happened to villages in central Surinam.

The slashes cut by the jungle commando have wounded us deeply by torture, rape and kidnapping inflicted upon our people. The jungle commando even murdered our people.

Because of this situation, our people have had to take refuge. Part of them have fled to French Guyana, another part has been deported by the authorities in Paramaribo. Now a considerable number of the are staying with relatives. The accomodations of our people are almost humiliating. Ostensibly, we are guarded permanantly. In fact, no contact with the outside is allowed.

In spite of our remaining neutral in the conflict between the government army and the jungle commando, we accused by both sides of collaboration with the other. This makes us victims in a conflict that is alien to us.

In particular, I want to talk about my people, the Lokonos, who have been displaced into camps around Paramaribo, the capital of Surinam. Our people have been put in a situation which is totally foreign to us. We have to live in a place in which we never wanted to. In fact, we are strangers in our own country. In the refugee camp, we are forced to depend on the Surinam government.

Let me refer to the U.N.O. document "the Rights of Tribal Peoples", rights which were first acknowledged internationally in 1957, here in Geneva. In this document proprietary rights, the right of land use exercised by native people on their traditional territory, their rights to the yields of the soil, their right to a culture and identity of their own and their right to survival are acknowledged by the United Nations.

We appeal to you to keep in mind the violations of human rights and the gravity of our situation.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen.