

WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

SESSION 15

28 JULY - 1 AUGUST 1997

GENEVA

ADDRESS BY COMMISSIONER TERRY WAIA

**OF THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMISSION
(ATSIC)**

AGENDA ITEM 7: DECADE OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Madam Chairperson
Distinguished Members of the Working Group
Indigenous Brothers and Sisters
Ladies and Gentlemen

ATSIC has responsibility for the co-ordination, planning and implementation of Decade activities in Australia.

We are totally committed to the major objective for the Decade, the timely approval by the General Assembly of the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Draft Declaration expresses our fundamental rights as indigenous peoples and we, along with many others here, will continue to seek its speedy passage through the United Nations system.

We are well aware that this is a crucial stage in the consideration of the Draft Declaration by the Commission on Human Rights Working Group. This year's meeting will be an opportunity for Government's to demonstrate their good faith. We have spent many long hard years developing the current Draft and are committed to maintaining its integrity.

The protection and advancement of our rights is logical and appropriate for the Decade.

In Australia we are seeking to make this the foundation for our Decade activities. It has to be said, however, that there has been a **significant slowing down of activity** in the last 12 months as we have been **fighting on many fronts** for the maintenance of our fundamental human and indigenous rights, **our rights to our land and our native title.**

As we alerted you to last year, Madam Chair, ATSIC has developed an information kit on the Draft Declaration, consisting of a **plain language version of the Draft Declaration**, information sheets on the experience of indigenous peoples in the United Nations and a **textual analysis of the Draft Declaration.**

The information kit was launched by our former Chairperson, Miss Lois O'Donoghue on 16 September 1996. It was well received both in Australia and internationally and is currently able to be accessed on **ATSIC'S Internet Homepage.**

The kit has been widely distributed and is seen as an important initiative in raising the awareness of both the indigenous and non-indigenous community of the rights of indigenous peoples and the existence of the Draft Declaration.

A special logo for the Decade has also been developed to promote national activities connected with the Decade.

During the reconciliation convention held in May this year, the Report on the Stolen Generations, "**Bringing them Home**" was launched.

This **profound and moving report** was the outcome of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's National Inquiry into the separation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families which took place last year. **These separations were sanctioned by government policy throughout much of this century and as late as the 1970s. Indigenous children were taken from their families** into institutions or foster homes to promote their **assimilation** into the wider society. **The policy failed. However, and the separated children bear the scars of their experiences to this day.**

The reconciliation convention and the release of the report were crucial events examining and acknowledging the reality of Australia's past and providing an opportunity to reaffirm a different future.

Madam Chair, this is what the Decade is also about - **reaffirming commitments to a different and more positive future.**

The success of the Decade will depend on the **co-operative efforts** of both governments and indigenous peoples in seeking to **achieve outcomes of real and lasting benefit** to indigenous peoples. We need new and equitable relationships between States and indigenous peoples.

Relationships which recognise our rights to **negotiate** as distinct peoples, and our **rights to determine the future for our peoples.**

We **urge all Governments** to genuinely commit themselves to achieving these aims.

Thank you