



Statement At The First Session Of The United Nations Permanent Forum For
Indigenous Peoples, New York,
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By Alfred Ilenre, Emiroaf Secretary-General

Mr Chairman,

I am by name Alfred Ilenre. I am of the Edo indigenous tribe from Nigeria. I speak on behalf of the Ethnic Minority and Indigenous Rights Organisation of Africa (EMIROAF). EMIROAF is a Pan-African organisation dedicated to the prevention of discrimination and protection of the rights of ethnic minority, indigenous and local communities all over Africa. As the focal point for the International Alliance of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests, EMIROAF networks with similar organizations throughout the world.

It is a great honour and privilege, Mr Chairman to be present at this history-making event on the occasion of the first session of the United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples. We have come a long way. This is particularly an epoch making occasion for us in EMIROAF, for it was ten years ago, that our organization under the leadership of our Foundation President, the late Ken Saro-Wiwa first presented the case of African indigenous and ethnic minority peoples at the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations in Geneva in 1992. EMIROAF congratulates the UNHCR for its painstaking background work that made this august occasion a reality.

It has always been stated that one of the problems Africa faces is that of ethnic and indigenous community pluralism. Africa nation states are creations of colonial intervention. Different ethnic groups and indigenous communities were brought together to meet colonial economic exigencies without any platform for the nationalities to dialogue on the basis of their common objectives.

A situation where warring African tribes were forced to live together to form states without any peace negotiation or armistice has continued to breed conflict all over Africa. All the same, African must learn how to live with all its diversity. EMIROAF calls for the restructuring of African nation states by granting ~~them~~ self-determination and control over resources to the component parts *including indigenous and local communities*.

The objective of African is to cultivate the benefit of ethnic, indigenous and cultural diversity while minimizing the destructive political potentials.

The global waves of democracy have been attempting to meet these goals but the desire is not just to have the right to vote or be voted for or the freedom to form political parties. Evidence has proved that a well-written constitution may not be enough to guarantee good governance and a stable polity.

For instance, in Nigeria, Africa's biggest nation where the multi-ethnic nature of the country led to the establishment of a loose federation at independence in 1960, a few elite bureaucrats in collaboration with a military clique overthrew the elected government in 1966, dismissed the constitution, took control of government, introduced cantonment laws and manipulated government policies to suit their ethnic and elite class interests. Following these trends, military dictatorship and one party rule became the fashion all over Africa. *In such circumstances indigenous and local communities are the major victims.*

African nation states as the product of artificiality have nothing culturally binding them together. They have only been merely kept together by international protocols, treaties, diplomacy and conventions and sustained by loans, grants and development aids provided by the industrialised nations.

While discussing global problems, most African leaders have often said that indigenous, environmental and basic social security issues are their internal problems and that outsiders should not meddle with them. EMIROAF believes that it is very much the business of the international community to be concerned about reckless and harmful forms of social repression, discrimination, internal colonialism and injustices committed against indigenous and local communities in Africa, as we are all citizens of the world. Indeed African nation states are the creation of external forces.

Everybody with conscience has every right to question any corrupt African leader who has seen internal colonialism, corruption, repression and oppression as ways of life. Leaders who siphon away the resources of their peoples in coded account in foreign banks, while their citizens have no shelter over their heads, no clothes to cover their nakedness and no food to check their hunger are not helping the cause of developing a peaceful world order.

Leaders anywhere in the world, who made their ordinary citizens landless and insecure tenants; Leaders who create societies where children are born into debt and die in debt; leaders who sit in power to see half of their country's infants die before age five should not be allowed to sit with decent human beings as leaders. They have no business being in power, they should be treated as bandits and terrorists and tried for crime against humanity.

GENDER

The domination of women is ~~one~~ the most nagging moral question confronting Africa today. Women everywhere, even in the advanced countries are relegated to secondary status. Very often they are subjected to violence both at domestic and public places, offences which largely go unpunished.

The situation in Africa is beyond reason. Indigenous and local communities like the people of the Niger Delta of Nigeria are among the poorest of the poor in Africa. Even among the poorest populations, indigenous women suffer more deprivation than men. There is a higher rate of female mortality among indigenous communities, which is more fatal among illiterate women.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The United Nations should treat illiteracy as a universal problem and a ~~obstacle~~^{hindrance} against peace. There should be resources made available by the UN to ensure that every child born into this world, boy or a girl has the right to unfettered free and compulsory primary and middle school education. Only an educated citizenry can have the ability to think, defend their rights and challenge corrupt leaders to change from their criminal ways.

African indigenous communities have the mechanisms, culture and the will to develop themselves and protect their environment. They can provide basic social services like pipe borne water, agriculture, educational and health facilities for their communities without having to wait for the corruption-ridden governments of most Africa nation states.

All they require, Mr Chairman, is economic empowerment, resources management, education infrastructure development, vocational training, capacity building, civil society and gender empowerment. The era of mega governments should come to an end and communities with as small as a few hundred ^{indigenous} populations should have the capacity to develop and protect the environment without having to wait for government handouts.

EMIROAF has sacrificed everything dear and sacred to heart in the defence of the cause of indigenous peoples all over Africa against oppressive forces during many years of struggle, sorrows, passion, anguish and agony. In the process we have lost valuable men and materials. We have worked in close collaboration with government organizations, international indigenous and human rights NGOS in promoting international advocacy and net working. We have in the process learnt from each other's experiences that no race has exclusive preserve of knowledge, talent and brains. All that is required is the right political structure under which to operate.

Finally, EMIROAF submits that the Permanent Forum when in full function should set up offices in all the geo-political regions and sub-political regions to interact regularly with indigenous and local communities all over the world.

I feel greatly honoured presenting this statement, Mr Chairman at this great festival of our indigenous brothers and sisters from all over the globe in New York.

Thanks

Alfred ILENRE