



Monday, September 22, 2014

By Matthew Thomas

Agenda Item: Roundtable 1 – UN System Action for the Implementation of Rights of Indigenous Peoples

In the next few days, we will hear interventions from indigenous peoples from around the world, yet one region continues to remain underrepresented at this Conference - the Middle East. While the Middle East is home to a variety of indigenous peoples, international human rights mechanisms, including the UN's framework on indigenous rights, have provided little in regards to their particular challenges. AUA Americas' first raised this issue in May of this year at the 13th session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, however events transpiring in the region since then compel our organization to make a similar appeal at this month's World Conference on Indigenous Peoples. Quite ominously, we were poised to deliver a similar intervention on the rising terrorist threat in Northern Iraq and subsequent challenges facing the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq one month prior to the fall of the city of Mosul in June to the terrorist organization currently known as the Islamic State.

Assyrians, referred to also as Chaldeans and Syriacs, represent a distinct, ethno-religious and linguistic community in the Middle East with a heritage linked to the pre-Islamic and pre-Arab civilizations of Mesopotamia. They are politically non-dominant, profess to various ancient traditions of Christianity, and were historically the first to settle in many of the territories of Northern Iraq, Northeastern Syria, Southeastern Turkey and Northwestern Iran. Their language, a dialect of Aramaic known commonly as "Sureth", once a lingua franca of Western Asia, has been designated as "definitely endangered" by UNESCO and faces the threat of extinction in the lands where it originated.

In conclusion, we welcome the WCIP outcome document and urge its realization in the Middle East. We also urge the Special Rapporteur to address the aforementioned human rights concerns currently facing Iraq's indigenous Assyrians and other communities by exercising the authority of her mandate to conduct a country visit to that state. Since Iraq issued a standing invitation to all Human Rights Council Special Procedures mandate holders in 2010, no Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Issues has conducted a country visit in the Middle East nor requested a country visit to any part of the region.

Thank you.