



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES INDIGENOUS VOICES

PRESS RELEASE

International Day brings recognition of indigenous peoples' contribution to environmental protection, combating climate change

(New York, 9 August) As the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is celebrated around the world on 9 August, indigenous peoples' contribution to environmental protection is being recognized.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in his message to mark the Day, said "Recently, the international community has grown increasingly aware of the need to support indigenous people -- by establishing and promoting international standards; vigilantly upholding respect for their human rights; integrating the international development agenda, including the Millennium Development Goals, in policies, programmes and country-level projects; and reinforcing indigenous peoples' special stewardship on issues related to the environment and climate change".

In addressing these issues, and recalling the theme of the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (2005-2015), "Partnership for action and dignity", the Secretary-General said "let us be guided by the fundamental principle of indigenous peoples' full and effective participation."

Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, Mr. Sha Zukang, in his official message for the International Day, noted that indigenous peoples live in many of the world's most biologically diverse areas and have accumulated a great deal of knowledge about these environments.

"With their wealth of knowledge about their environment indigenous peoples can and should play a crucial role in the global effort to respond to climate change. We should listen to them," said Mr. Zukang.

For example, indigenous peoples use their traditional knowledge to lessen the impact of natural disasters. An Oxford University symposium in April this year heard how indigenous people "use strips of mangrove forest to absorb the force of tidal surges and tsunamis, others apply genetic diversity in crops to avoid total crop failure, and some communities migrate among habitats as disaster strikes"¹.


The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as adopted by the Human Rights Council in June 2006 and currently being considered for adoption by the General Assembly, also recognizes that respect for indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable development, including proper management of the environment.

"The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples represents the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of indigenous peoples. Many still live under the most oppressive and marginalized conditions and yet they are also the ones who are providing solutions to serious world problems

¹ Environment News Service, "Indigenous Peoples on Climate Change Front Lines", 19 April 2007 <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/apr2007/2007-04-19-03.asp>



United Nations



such as climate change and the erosion of biocultural diversity,” stated Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Chairperson of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

In recognition of indigenous peoples’ particular vulnerability to climate change and their important role in responding to it, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in its 2008 session will focus on “Climate change, bio-cultural diversity and livelihoods: the stewardship role of indigenous peoples and new challenges”.

Vulnerability in the Face of Climate Change

Many indigenous communities are already needing to adapt their way of life due to the changing environment - from Saami reindeer herding communities in Sweden whose reindeer are unable to find food beneath the thick ice due to heavier than normal snowfalls, to indigenous communities in the Andes where extreme weather events are creating serious food security problems.

In the words of Ms. Sheila Watt-Cloutier, an Inuit activist who was recently awarded the Mahbub ul Haq Award for Excellence in Human Development by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, “We are all connected. The Arctic is geographically isolated from the rest of the world, yet the Inuk hunter who falls through the thinning sea ice is connected to melting glaciers in the Andes and the Himalayas, and to the flooding of low-lying and small island states.”²

According to a recent report from the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)³, several indigenous communities in Alaska are actively looking into relocation options for entire communities due to land and coastal erosion caused by the thawing of the permafrost and large storm-driven waves.

“More than 80 per cent of Alaskan communities, comprised mostly of indigenous peoples, are identified as vulnerable to either coastal or river erosion,” says the report.

Relocation is also an issue in small island states such as Vanuatu and Samoa where rising sea levels and flooding from extreme weather events are a problem. According to the same report, one community in Vanuatu has been forced to abandon their homes and move half a kilometre inland as their original settlement is now being flooded up to five times a year.

High altitude areas are not only seeing melting glaciers and ice peaks but according to the CBD report, some are also seeing negative impacts on their agriculture as a result of climate change and drought. In the Cordillera in the Philippines, 2000 year old rice terraces are under attack from giant two-foot earthworms which have been thriving due to dwindling water supplies, causing soil and terrace walls to dry up even further.

About the Day

The International Day of the World’s Indigenous People is commemorated each year on 9 August in recognition of the first meeting of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations in Geneva in 1982. This year’s observance at the UN is being organized by the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Department of Economic and Social Affairs; and the NGO Committee on the Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples.

For more information of the Day and events at UN Headquarters, please visit <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii>

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² Inuit Circumpolar Council (Canada), The Canadian Environment Awards Citation of Lifetime Achievement, www.inuitcircumpolar.com/index.php?auto_slide=&ID=357&Lang=En&Parent_ID=¤t_slide_num=

³ Draft Report on Indigenous and Local Communities Highly Vulnerable to Climate Change, Advisory Group Meeting on Article 8(j) and Related Provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2nd Meeting, Montreal, 30 April-03 May 2007

