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The 15th Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) commenced on May 9th 2016. Its theme was “Indigenous peoples: conflict, peace, and resolution.” Mr Wu Hongbo, The Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, opened the forum in the General Assembly Hall at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City. The Forum began with a traditional ceremonial welcome from Todadaho Sid Hill, Chief of the Onodaga Nation, followed by the election of the Chair of UNPFII 15, Mr Alvaro Pop of Guatemala. The General Assembly’s attention was then directed to a video message from Ban Ki-Moon who highlighted the importance of the Forums creation of a coherent and system wide Action Plan for effective implementation of the UNPFII theme. Mr Mogens Lykketoft, the President of the 70th session of the General Assembly, noted the Forum’s strong involvement in the creation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of equality, non-discrimination, human rights, and the protection of mother earth. President Lykketoft expressed that these engagements explicitly show the inclusion of indigenous people in the implementation of the 2016 SDGs. He stressed that dialogue of cooperation, openness, and recommendations of implementation strategies will be important in achieving goal sixteen of the SDGs. Goal sixteen promotes peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provides access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

President Lykketoft’s statement was followed by the Vice President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Mr Sven Jurgenson, who helped in the election of the Bureau of UNPFII. Mr Wu Hongbo, the Secretary-General of ECOSOC stated that the System-wide Action Plan was ready for implementation. The Plan is in place to support the implementation of the rights of indigenous people at a local level. This will be accomplished by raising awareness of the issues as well as executing the SDGs, as a desire to achieve the ends of the Declarations of Indigenous People. Aura Teleguario, the Minister of Labor and Social Prevention of Guatemala, discussed the indigenous people as the most vulnerable population. Their vulnerability lies in reference to their political influence, cultural relevance, and budgetary depletions. The Attorney General and Minister of Justice of Canada, Ms Jody Wilson-Raybould, spoke about the indigenous people being in a transitional period of nation building and rebuilding. She stated that the indigenous people needed to deconstruct the colonial legacy and rebuild their nations while maintaining their own destinies.

As implemented under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the six mandated areas of the Permanent Forum—health, education, human rights, economic and social development, and environment and culture—outlined the conflicts brought forth by member-states and representatives alike. Dozens of states sent representatives to discuss how their country has improved the six mandated areas for the indigenous people. However, dozens of indigenous representatives and allies were there to discuss the lack of effective improvements and human rights violations imposed by the state. For example, the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, Ahmad Alhendawi, made a statement on the indigenous peoples’ continued suffering from inadequate medical supplies, education, loss of language, culture and displacement, and shaming of their identity. These unaddressed problems of the states were followed by recommendations on how to further improve and implement the six mandated areas. Therefore, Alhendawi recommended mechanisms to ensure equal, adequate, and accessible medicine, education, and cultural relevance for indigenous people.

Following the Envoy of Youth's statement, the Representatives of the Global Indigenous Youth Caucus made three separate statements outlining the problems associated with criminalization and forced displacement, fundamental human rights violations, and the importance of education and understanding colonization, respectively. The Youth Caucus made recommendations on creating a mechanism to ensure free prior and informed consent, to create concrete policies for eliminating discrimination, to protect the security of indigenous defenders, to educate on the history and cultures of the people, and to increase participation of indigenous people in the implementation of these recommendations. Also, the Youth Caucus asked for the joint collaboration across UN agencies such as OHCHR, UNICEF, and UNESCO. Member-states, the Special Envoy of the Secretary General on Youth, UN Women, and various other countries and organizations spoke on the implementation of the six mandated areas of UNPFII. In addition, the Representatives of the Global Indigenous Youth Caucus outlined problems of hydroelectric and mining projects that deny the Indigenous the resources of their land and cause forced displacement of many tribes. In defense of their territory, many of the indigenous people and their leaders have been murdered or incarcerated.

As more land is being taken, the indigenous languages are not being upheld. The preservation of indigenous language is quickly waning due to indigenous youth's forced assimilation into schools without proper and relevant historical, cultural, and linguistically appropriate education. The government's systematic abuse of the indigenous people has caused emotional trauma amongst the indigenous youth. This trauma has caused for an exponential increase in the rates of youth suicide due to a feeling of irrelevancy, unimportance, exclusion, vulnerability, and despair. The Forum focused on raising awareness of the high rates of suicide amongst indigenous children and youth as well as recommendations of how to address the problem. In response to youth suicide, representatives advocated for the importance of children and youth's rights to be happy, outlined under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Focusing on ways to improve SDG three, the right to good health, by also focusing on mental health, can help decrease the feelings of depression and suicidal ideation across tribal nations.

The Office of the President of the General Assembly (OPGA) representative discussed the difficulty of giving indigenous people ECOSOC status, as indigenous people are neither intergovernmental organizations nor Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The representative discussed the need of a "unique status" for indigenous people at the UN. This status would promote the participation of indigenous people by including self-identification and state recognition. Following the OPGA, Chairman Pop opened the floor to general statements on the follow up to the recommendations made. States took the floor to discuss their commitments to upholding the SDGs and Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. Amongst the states the International Labor Organization (ILO), the Asian Indigenous Women Network, the Indonesian National Human Rights Commission, interagency support groups of UNPFII, Group of Friends of Indigenous People, and the Food and Agriculture Organization spoke of the importance of creating dialogues in spaces that allow the participation of indigenous people at a local, national, and international level. This inclusive space would be in place to speak about indigenous requests for equal access to culturally relevant education, medical supplies, and land ownership.

Beatrice Duncan, the representative of UN Women, spoke on indigenous women and girls and the challenges they face in obtaining social services as well as their inability to participate in the economic and political environments of their tribes. Under the pledge of the Sustainable Development Goals "no one will be left behind," Representative Duncan stated that discrimination is a structural problem that needs to be addressed under SDG five and six, which is achieving gender equality and empower all women and girl and ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, respectively. Representative Duncan stated that SDG five and six are indispensable in obtaining the human rights and participatory rights of indigenous women and girls.

Participation became a very important component of the Forum, as indigenous nations stated why having a place for open dialogue of the issues is so important. The indigenous nations of Brazil called for the Forum to pressure the Brazilian government into demarcating their lands. Demarcation could help eliminate the problems associated with hydro-electric projects on tribal territory, conflict over land, and displacement of indigenous people. Brazil stressed the importance of communication to avoid wars and promote safety and health of indigenous members. The Norwegian representative of the Arctic Indigenous Caucus discussed their support as a permanent observer status for indigenous people at the UN. The representative also urged member states to adopt national action plans for the implementations of mechanisms to ensure the implementation of rights of indigenous people. Under permanent observer status the indigenous nations would have the opportunity to participate in any UN dialogue.

In addition to the problems of participation, an El Salvador indigenous representative discussed the ignorance and denial of governments when they allude to the existence of indigenous people. The representative called for an interface between the indigenous people and the government. The interface would allow for dialogue to promote the right of indigenous people between indigenous people and state institutions. Colombia's indigenous representative spoke urging the Colombian government to allow indigenous people and women to participate in the government as well as provide social protection and control of indigenous territory. The representative discussed the importance of having an indigenous government and a plan for peace processes that would allow for a better dialogue and procession.

Opposed to the other states' calls to action, the United States representative called attention to the existing mechanisms in place that encourage indigenous people to participate such as Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). However, a representative quickly retaliated to the US statement by discussing the limited influence of the mechanisms and the limitations it has on ensuring effective participation. The representative discussed the importance of measuring the participation on a national level and recommends that the UN Funds and Programs support dialogues in interagency support groups.

The Deputy of the Republic of Cuba made a statement about the extinction of the aboriginals from Cuba that displayed the importance of communication and participation. In response to Cuba's claim of the aboriginal's extinction, the Taíno aboriginals of Cuba stood and spoke of their existence. The aboriginals stated that the Cuban education system has wrongly displayed their history and existence in their State. This improper education has led to discrimination of the indigenous youth. The representatives at the forum called for proper education of their people in a curriculum devised by their people. The indigenous people also called for more cooperation and international involvement as well as capacity building and developmental programs in place for their people.

The Special Rapporteur of the Rights of Indigenous People, Ms. Victoria Corpuz, the Chair Rapporteur of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous People, Alexey Tskarev, and the Special Rapporteur on the Field of Cultural Rights, Karima Bennouna each made a statement. The first Rapporteur discussed the importance of overcoming human rights violations as a part of the World Conference on Indigenous People's Outcome document. The second Rapporteur focused on the projects in place to restore the rights to health of indigenous people. The third Rapporteur discussed mandating cultural rights in an attempt to overcome the intentional destruction of cultural heritage. Representatives were able to have an open dialogue with the Rapporteurs. In this dialogue, Mexico begged for international cooperation in bringing back their indigenous children who were taken by the Mexican government nineteen months ago in an attempt to eliminate the indigenous culture. This is a type of cultural genocide in place to intentionally destroy indigenous culture.

Many State governmental representatives spoke about what the government is doing to enforce the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People while others spoke of mistreatment. Indigenous groups who have survived off of the land and use cocaine and marijuana as medical uses are being criminalized. Governments are implementing projects that cause displacement as well as pollution to indigenous lands. Indigenous Nations are calling on the UN Special Rapporteur on Genocide to see the way their nations are being treated and pressure their governments into action. Indigenous tribes are concerned that their goals are not and will not be met by the government as outlined by the World Conference on Indigenous People's Outcome Document as well as the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. Indigenous groups believe that their rights to water should be protected and respected and that their children and youth should have access to health care, education, and cultural relevancy.

The six mandated areas of the Permanent Forum are not being met by governments internationally. The indigenous nations are left in deteriorating conditions due to a lack of access to medical supplies, improper and inadequate linguistic and cultural education, killings, a lack of water, a lack of participation and land ownership, and pollution by mining and hydroelectric projects. Collaboration between governments and the indigenous people is important in improving the lives of the indigenous. UNPFII 15 was the first Forum where participants held separate dialogues with Member States and United Nations entities that were "direct and frank." This open participation spurred dialogue aimed at improving the conditions of the indigenous nations. The recommendations made at UNPFII were numerous and varied. However, if even only a few of these recommendations are carried out, this action could greatly impact the lives of indigenous people by restoring some of their basic human rights, globally.

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