

## Indigenous peoples take centre stage



Once again, the largest meeting of indigenous peoples from all regions of the world with over 2,000 persons expected to attend is underway at UN Headquarters from now until 29 May. The annual session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and its **over 50 side events**, is an

opportunity for staff to familiarize themselves with the situations, contributions and aspirations of indigenous peoples.

Estimates point to more than 370 million indigenous peoples in some 90 countries worldwide. While they are from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, they

share challenges such as: lack of basic healthcare; limited access to education; loss of control over land; discrimination; forced assimilation; abject poverty; displacement; human rights violations; and economic and social marginalization.

This year's **8th session of the Forum** is focusing on three broad topics: implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; the relationship between indigenous peoples and industrial corporations, especially those involved in mineral, oil and gas extraction; and the situation of indigenous communities in the Arctic region.

### Opening ceremony

In keeping with tradition, the session opened with expressions of gratitude to nature from Tododaho Sid Hill, Chief of the Onondaga Nation, from New York who gave thanks to, among other things, Mother Earth, berries, trees, deer and eagles. Directing his thoughts to the sky, he thanked the sun for warming the Earth, the moon for moistening the Earth and the stars for helping the moon.

Taking the floor next, a representative of the Assembly of First Nations Women's Council led delegates in a ceremonial song that honoured women as life-givers, providers, mothers, daughters, grandmothers and aunts.

Also participating in the meeting were senior UN officials, including Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiros who said the Forum was meeting at a crucial time, as the world grappled with a "swarm of crises," including intensified hunger, poverty, global warming and security threats.

The DSG went on to point out that indigenous peoples had a record of resilience in the face of great adversity, but they still suffered from prejudice and marginalization. Indigenous women were brutalized by violence. Powerful forces continued to take land from indigenous peoples, denigrate their cultures and directly attack their lives. Such acts violated every principle enshrined in the Declaration and offended the conscience of humanity.

"We ignore indigenous peoples at our peril. But if we listen to them, society as a whole will benefit," she said. That meant bringing their contributions to the table in international negotiations, notably those leading up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December.

Rachel Mayanja, Assistant Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, said United Nations agencies were in fact responding well to the Forum's recommendations on economic and social development. But follow-up to the recommendations was difficult, due to a lack of information from many Governments, particularly on the state of human development of indigenous peoples.

General Assembly President Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann pointed out the "bitter irony" that while indigenous people did the most to protect Earth from "rapacious" agro-industrialists, they were most hurt by the global economic crisis.

Newly-elected session Chairperson, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz of the Philippines called on the Forum to work in partnership with United Nations agencies and programmes, drawing on each other's strengths, to ensure that the rights of indigenous people were protected.



"Always keep in mind that we are talking here as partners, and not as protagonists. The odds we face in getting our rights respected and our self-determined development operationalized are many," she said.

### **About the Forum and the Declaration**

The Permanent Forum was established by the Economic and Social Council in 2000 to discuss indigenous issues relating to economic and social development, the environment, education, health and human rights. It is composed of 16 independent experts functioning in their personal capacities; eight are nominated by Governments and eight directly by indigenous

organizations in their regions.

The Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is based in New York in the Division for Social Policy and Development of the [Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#).

The landmark [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), drafted and debated for more than 20 years and adopted by the General Assembly in 2007, emphasizes the rights of indigenous peoples to live in dignity, to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions and to pursue their self-determined development, in keeping with their needs and aspirations.

For more information, please visit UNPFII Website at:

[http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/session\\_eighth.html](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/session_eighth.html)