

**15th session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**

**17 May 2016**

**Conference Room 4**

**Panel 2: Indigenous Women in Peace and Conflict - Agenda Item 5**

*By: Anita Isaacs, Haverford College*

Mr. Chairperson, distinguished representatives, experts and guests:

I am at once honored and humbled to offer a few, succinct, observations on the political dilemmas of reconciliation for indigenous survivors of genocide. At the outset I must be clear. I speak from a particular vantage point. I am an outsider – a woman, yes, but neither indigenous nor genocide survivor. I am a woman who has had the opportunity to observe and accompany indigenous widow activist efforts to pursue truth, justice and reparations over two decades. And I am a professional political scientist who has reflected and analyzed the causes, consequences and challenges of reconciliation through a combination of research and teaching on indigenous postwar reconciliation led in the main by female survivors.

There is not much one can say in 5-7 minutes – so I am offering you some bullet point thoughts. Hear this as a roadmap of sorts – my effort to share a political lexicon that encompasses key terms and captures essential political dynamics of reconciliation – as I have come to understand these. Although I won't consistently

distinguish between indigenous women and men I want to highlight the critical leadership role played by courageous indigenous women activists, women like Rosalina Tuyuc, who have spearheaded the struggle and infused it with a particular concern for widowed female survivors and their children and grandchildren – the future generations, as they are typically referred to.

To begin with, I am compelled to make two distinctions:

First there are significant differences in conceptualizing reconciliation in postwar – and especially post genocidal, as contrasted with post-authoritarian, or dictatorial, societies. It is partly a question of the scale of repression inflicted on perceived enemies of the state. But it is mostly so when indigenous communities are either the target or the brunt of political repression – that is to say when state adversaries are ethnic, rather than ideological.

The second distinction flows from the first. The term **conciliation** rather than **reconciliation** constitutes a more appropriate statement of objectives. The difference between the two is not semantic. Establishing **reconciliation** as the goal obscures the depth of the challenges post genocidal societies confront. Framing processes as **reconciliatory** misses the point that genocide is not a singular event. Its perpetration is embedded in a colonial and post-colonial history of entrenched racism, with its full range of devastating cultural, economic, psychological, political and social causes and effects. I appreciate the wisdom of a question posed to me two

decades ago by indigenous survivors -- “How can we be reconciled when we have never been conciled?”

Third, these distinctions matter because conciliation underscores the profound need for wholesale transformation. To invoke an overused metaphor, the objective cannot be a simple mending of a torn social and political fabric. Instead, it requires the creative stitching of a new and social and political fabric that aims to be tear-resistant. What I mean to say is that a core objective of conciliation is to prevent a future need for reconciliation. It strives to attain the goal of non-repetition, captured by the mantra “never again.”

Fourth, there are a few terms that capture the essence of the task and vision of conciliation from a political scientist’s perspective. One of course, is that it these are context-specific processes. There is no one size fits all blueprint. At the same time, these processes share a need for a transformative nation -building project grounded in a radically democratic vision, that is, at a minimum, inclusive, egalitarian, participatory and autonomous.

Fifth, realizing such an ambitious vision is a very tall order for three broad reasons that I’ll only allude to here.

One it can be enormously challenging mission for indigenous peoples who have suffered historical, cultural and structural racism with its attendant panoply of

psychological, cultural, economic, political and social impacts. It is especially arduous for indigenous women who are doubly discriminated against as women and as indigenous. It means recognizing ones' people (**women** and men) as claimants of full rights. And it means committing to a sustained struggle to acquire these all the while avoiding further marginalization, repression **and** co-optation.

Second it may require waging an internal, conciliatory battle to generate acceptance of women as political leaders, and to forge a political vision, identity and struggle. Indigenous communities are not naturally politically or socially homogenous, they can be as sexist as the rest of society, and state sponsored genocide tends to purposefully intensify and fracture divisions.

Third, although alliances with fellow civil society activists can strengthen the indigenous rights-based political struggle – it tends to mirror historical ethnic fault lines and deeply embedded racism and sexism. Civil society can be as much, or almost as much, adversary, as natural partner. Conciliation asks non-indigenous civil society to also change its mentality, attitudes and behavior.

Fourth, and finally, an indigenous autonomous, inclusive, egalitarian and participatory democratic vision is likely to be especially anathema to the elite peace negotiators – especially local power holders but often their international partners. Conciliation requires them to get on board, or to be forced on board. Like civil society activists, they must come to know and acknowledge historical wrongs

committed by their forefathers and mothers – not just over the past several years, but also over centuries of colonialism and post colonialism. And they must become committed to righting those historical wrongs that entail risk and sacrifice.

I end with an observation. Scholars and privileged elites frequently talk about reconciliation as forgiveness and forgetting. In my view conciliation is neither. It can never be about political forgetting, and forgiveness is a matter of personal choice and cannot consist simply of uttering words of apology and pledges of reform. Rather, it means harnessing political memory in the service of a painful, laborious and uncertain process of imagining and constructing a new, egalitarian, radical, and durable nation, state, polity and society.

Thank you.