



Press Briefing

PRESS CONFERENCE BY WOMEN'S COMMISSION INDIGENOUS PARTICIPANTS

About 60 indigenous participants of the ongoing "Beijing+10" review by the Commission on the Status of Women were calling for indigenous women's rights to be recognized globally, correspondents were told at a Headquarters press conference this morning.

Talking to correspondents were the President of the Centre for Indigenous People's Autonomy and Development on the North Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, Mirna Cunningham; the founder of Umoja Uaso Women's Group (Kenya), Rebecca Samaria Lolosoli; and a representative of the Native Women's Association of Canada, Celeste McKay.

The speakers informed the press that a draft resolution on "indigenous women beyond Beijing+10", which was introduced yesterday, would highlight their rights and specific needs, including poverty and violence.

Asked if she expected the resolution to be adopted, Ms. Cunningham said that members of the Indigenous Forum expected their voices to be heard. The sponsors were trying to promote a resolution that focused on positive action. The text did mention big gaps between the situation of indigenous women and other groups in various countries. So far, governments had been "more or less deaf" to the needs of indigenous women, and one could not expect their attitude to change overnight with the adoption of a resolution. However, she did believe that, with their commitment to the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, the governments would realize that it was impossible to achieve those objectives without addressing the problems of marginalized groups of the population, including indigenous women.

Introducing the speakers, Elissavet Stamatopoulou, Chief of the Secretariat of the United Nations' Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, said that the Forum had heard many stories of violence from indigenous women, who came from various parts of the world. That phenomenon reflected global trends, mediated by history and conditions specific to each area, including colonization, war, migration and globalized economic policies.

She added that, in many regions, gender-based violence was integral to the European conquest, setting a pattern where indigenous women were disproportionately targeted for rape as a weapon of war. Indigenous women continued to be subjected to violence in situations of conflict and forced displacement. For them, gender-based violence was fuelled not only by sexism, but also by racism and discrimination. It was perpetuated by policies that denied indigenous women and their women access to critical resources, including education, health care, police protection and access to the justice system.

Ms. Lolosoli focused on women's poverty and acts of sexual violence against Kenya's Samburu women by British soldiers, who had been using the area as a military training ground for decades. After being raped, many women had been chased from their homes by their husbands for bringing dishonour on the family and the community. Men often tried to take revenge on their wives, who were beaten, banished from their homes and sometimes even killed. Women's complaints were not taken seriously by the police, who insisted that they did not have strong cases.

“The men treat us like nothing”, Ms. Lolosoli said. “We are mistreated.” Women did not have any rights to land or property, which belonged to men. Abandoned by the husbands, the women’s “white children” also encountered many problems.

Ms. McKay drew correspondents’ attention to the alarmingly high rates of violence against Canada’s indigenous women. For example, indigenous women between the ages of 25 and 44 were five times more likely to die as a result of violence than non-indigenous women. The Native Women’s Association of Canada estimated that over 500 indigenous women had died from violent attacks of a sexual nature in the past 20 years. Recently, some 60 women, including 16 Aboriginal women, had gone missing in British Columbia as a result of violence. And yet, action was slow on behalf of the justice system. Indigenous women became victims of violence, because they were marginalized in society, lived in poverty and lacked education. Their lives remained at risk, in part because of the failure by the Government to take critical measures to reduce their marginalization and build better relations between indigenous peoples and the justice system.

The Association had worked closely with Amnesty International to produce a famous “Stolen Sisters” report, which described discrimination and violence against indigenous women in Canada, including cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. In March 2004, the Association had launched a campaign under the same title to raise awareness of the problem and advocate a policy that would address the underlying causes of attacks. Among the main priorities for the advancement of indigenous women, she mentioned the need for thorough research and statistics, public education and policy development for the protection of their rights.

An indigenous Miskita, Ms. Cunningham outlined the situation on the border between Honduras and Nicaragua, where women from her community crossed the river on a daily basis to work in the fields on what was Miskita Nation territory, but had now become part of Honduras. Women were often violated by the Honduran army and farmers who were colonizing the area. However, it was not only in her region that indigenous women were being attacked. They faced violence in many countries of Latin America, including Guatemala and Colombia. Another aspect of the issue was domestic violence, she added, for, according to some reports, 95 per cent of gender-based violence actually happened in women’s own homes.

To a question about the status of negotiations on the draft resolution, she added that according to the latest reports, in the negotiations on the outcome of the review, even some agreed parts of the Beijing and Cairo documents were being bracketed. “If there are too many brackets, I guess we won’t have a resolution”, she said. No matter what, indigenous women would continue fighting for their rights. In particular, in May, they would return to the Indigenous Forum, where they would continue pushing for recognition of indigenous women’s rights.

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