



Press Briefing

PRESS BRIEFING ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

The Beijing Platform of Action and other international instruments may have recognized indigenous women, but little had been done to change their often desperate situations, a member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues told correspondents at a Headquarters briefing this afternoon.

Economically, the forces of globalization had pressured indigenous people to open up their communities and extract their resources in the name of reducing poverty and boosting economic growth, said Victoria Tauli-Corpuz. “But such actions have simply caused more poverty and increased indigenous alienation.”

Ms. Tauli-Corpuz was joined by Lucy Mullenkei, Chair of the African Indigenous Women’s Organization, and Rigoberta Menchú Túm, 1992 Nobel Peace Laureate and President of the Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Túm, an organization promoting indigenous social, economic, cultural and land rights in Guatemala.

In the educational field, Ms. Tauli-Corpuz continued, research had shown that many indigenous girls had continued to drop out of school due to discrimination or violence in the classroom or their communities. In addition, school curricula had remained culturally insensitive, forcing indigenous people to assimilate and forgo their identities, rather than reinforcing their values and world views.

The situation was worse in Africa, where most nations failed to recognize the very existence of indigenous identities or rights, said Ms. Mullenkei. Indigenous land was often encroached upon, and women were marginalized through poverty, conflict, violence, and a dire lack of information and awareness.

Internationally, she noted that indigenous women were working through the ongoing Commission on the Status of Women to bring their issues to light. In addition, the African Commission on Women and Indigenous Rights had formed a working group in the African Union, while development of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues had been a huge step forward.

Ms. Túm added that indigenous peoples were not “begging” for their rights, but were fighting for them through proposals they had presented to the Commission. Indigenous people, especially women, had continued to suffer from racism and exclusion, mainly due to cultural values which would not change overnight. “The most important thing to us is the vision of inclusion”, she stressed.

Responding to a question about the number of indigenous women attending the Commission, Ms. Tauli-Corpuz said it was low -- only 60 from more than 70 countries with indigenous women -- due to insufficient resources. Ms. Mullenkei added that many indigenous women, in attempting to attend both the Commission and meetings of the Permanent Forum, also faced difficulties in obtaining visas to enter the United States.

Another correspondent asked whether indigenous people should be given priority within the framework of the Millennium Development Goal to halve poverty by 2015. Ms. Tauli-Corpuz emphasized that they should, but added that indigenous people were often bypassed in favour of the dominant population, sacrificed in the name of the majority. Ms. Mulenkei added that indigenous people often remained invisible due to the lack of segregated poverty statistics.

To another query, Ms. Mulenkei noted that many indigenous communities suffered from a “deficit in democracy” due to male-dominated traditional structures and laws. Women, for example, were often barred from inheriting property. Indigenous people were striving to change that imbalance, she said, addressing it in any way they could within their own communities.

In response to a question on the difference between African indigenous people and those from other regions, Ms. Mulenkei said many countries in other regions had revised their constitutions to recognize indigenous people, but only South Africa and Cameroon had made similar arrangements in her continent. Other African nations continued to ignore indigenous claims, asserting that all people in the continent were indigenous.

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