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**Statement by
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COORDINATOR OF THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF THE WORLD'S
INDIGENOUS PEOPLE TO THE THIRD COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL
ASSEMBLY ON THE ITEM "INDIGENOUS ISSUES"
New York, 19 October 2009**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Special Rapporteur, distinguished delegates,

As Coordinator of the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, I am pleased to address this Committee on the item of indigenous peoples' issues. I look forward to this occasion each year to highlight challenges and opportunities in our work with indigenous peoples for the improvement of their lives.

This Committee continues to be preoccupied with adverse situations faced by indigenous peoples around the world. Virtually all indicators of well-being demonstrate that indigenous peoples suffer disproportionately compared to non-indigenous populations. This is a major theme emerging from my Department's forthcoming publication, *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples*.

While indigenous peoples constitute approximately five per cent of the world's population, they make up 15 per cent of the world's poor. In some countries, the life expectancy of indigenous peoples is up to 20 years lower than that of the general population. They experience higher levels of maternal and infant mortality, malnutrition, diabetes and tuberculosis. Indeed, in some cases tuberculosis rates are up to 45 times higher in the indigenous population, in comparison to the non-indigenous.

Illiteracy is prevalent in many indigenous communities, while indigenous children have lower enrolment rates and higher drop-out rates than their non-indigenous schoolmates. Once out of school, indigenous peoples can expect higher rates of unemployment and significantly lower wages. These outcomes are a direct result of poverty, marginalization and discrimination – and of poor access to services that are frequently under-funded.

The status of indigenous peoples has been further exacerbated by the impact of a severe food crisis, economic and financial crisis, combined with the harsh effects of climatic change. Indigenous peoples are stewards of many of the most biologically diverse regions in the world. However, they are now suffering the consequences of global warming, sooner and to a greater degree than others.

I therefore welcome the Joint Crisis Initiatives uniting the efforts of the UN system to address the severe social effects of the current global challenges, particularly the financial and economic crisis. In this context, the special attention that the UN system has committed to pay to vulnerable groups should reach indigenous peoples and address their urgent situation and vulnerabilities.

Moreover, in the negotiations leading up to the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, the voices of indigenous peoples must also be heard. Indigenous peoples have direct experience of the impacts of climate change – and they have expressed that knowledge in their recently adopted Alaska Declaration.

The belief systems, cultures, languages and ways of life of indigenous peoples continue to be threatened, sometimes even by extinction. More than 4,000 of the approximately 7,000 languages spoken today are spoken by indigenous peoples. Language specialists predict that up to 95 per cent of the world's languages are likely to become extinct, or threatened with extinction, by the end of this century. This would be a tragedy for indigenous peoples and for the world.

Human rights violations are still part of indigenous peoples' reality. In many countries indigenous people face persecution for their work in defense of their human rights, especially when protecting their territories and natural resources.

In the development area, efforts have not moved fast enough to give adequate answers for indigenous peoples' well-being and sustainability, including in the area of the Millennium Development Goals. The participation gap is a special challenge. Indeed, much more needs to be done by Governments and the UN system to engage the full and effective participation of indigenous peoples in matters affecting their lives.

The reasons for persisting problems of indigenous peoples have varied over time – and have included lack of awareness or understanding of indigenous issues, lack of political will, socioeconomic complexities at national level, armed conflict, inadequate capacities at institutional and governance systems, or lack of clear normative guidance by the international community.

Today, we can be proud that the United Nations has provided the normative path for the way forward, with the General Assembly's adoption, two years ago, of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This seminal document is becoming the point of reference for all the work of the UN system in the area of indigenous peoples. This includes the work of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, which is explicitly mentioned in Article 42 of the Declaration.

Member States and indigenous peoples are increasingly using the Declaration for the solution of problems. I wish to welcome, in this regard, the special endorsements of the Declaration issued in the past year by the Governments of Australia and Colombia, and I look forward to concrete measures to advance its implementation.

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs is playing an important role in building capacities at national level to support the implementation of the Declaration, especially its impact on development processes. Drawing on the UNDG Guidelines on Indigenous Peoples' Issues, this work has already been initiated with UN Country Teams and in full cooperation with inter-agency mechanisms.

The Third Committee has a special role to play in promoting the implementation of the Declaration among all Member States, the intergovernmental system and civil society at large. The Committee can do so in various ways, including through its public debates and its support and review of the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates,

Next year, in 2010, we will reach the halfway mark of the Second Decade, initiated in 2005. The midterm-assessment, requested by the General Assembly, will be an important instrument to guide the UN system and Member States in our future actions to improve the situation of indigenous peoples.

This stock-taking exercise will cast a critical eye on our common achievements. Even more importantly, it will identify gaps and the areas where the UN system and Member States need to exert more and more focused effort. During its session in May, the UN Permanent Forum conducted a preliminary review of implementation of recommendations on the Second Decade, which clearly indicated that States must strengthen their efforts.

I call on all Member States and the UN system to engage actively in the mid-term evaluation of the Second Decade, and to strengthen their efforts on the ground to reach the Decade's goal and objectives.

A number of countries have made contributions to the UN Trust Fund on Indigenous Issues. I wish to extend my appreciation to the Governments of Algeria, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Estonia, Germany and Mexico who have contributed during 2009, and to the Government of Norway for hosting the 2009 pre-sessional meeting of the UN Permanent Forum. A contribution was also received from the International Fund for Agricultural Development and Japan has pledged a contribution. I encourage States and UN agencies to continue their generous support to the Trust Fund, including for the Second Decade's small grants programme.

Distinguished delegates,

Today the main international framework on indigenous issues is established – the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I urge all parties, Member States, the UN system, indigenous peoples and civil society at large to act on the basis of this instrument now created and placed in our hands.

Thank you.