
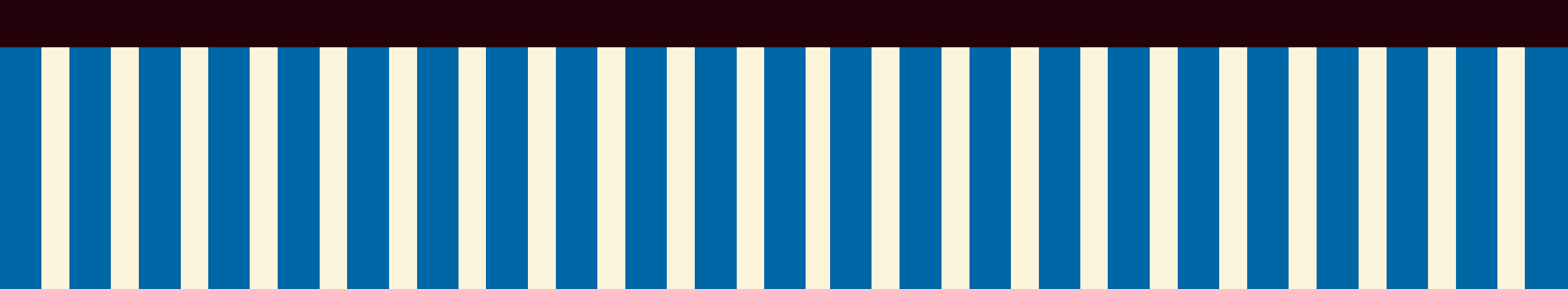




# INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

It is estimated that there are 300 to 500 million indigenous people in more than 70 countries around the world, representing over 5,000 languages and cultures on every continent. The inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures, indigenous people have social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live.

Despite their cultural differences, the various groups of indigenous peoples around the world share common problems related to the protection of their rights as distinct peoples. While they have long sought recognition of their identities, their ways of life and their rights to traditional lands and resources, throughout history those rights have been violated. Today, it is widely recognized that they are among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable peoples in the world. The international community has now come to recognize that special measures must be taken to protect them and their rights.





# PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Discussions about establishing a “Permanent Forum” for indigenous peoples began in the late 1980s. Indigenous peoples and others in the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations felt that the structures of the United Nations were not well-suited to consider comprehensively issues of concern to indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples also felt that their direct participation in the United Nations was limited. In light of these concerns, indigenous peoples and others proposed establishing a new body that would focus on global issues related to indigenous peoples and that would offer the opportunity for indigenous peoples to participate more fully.

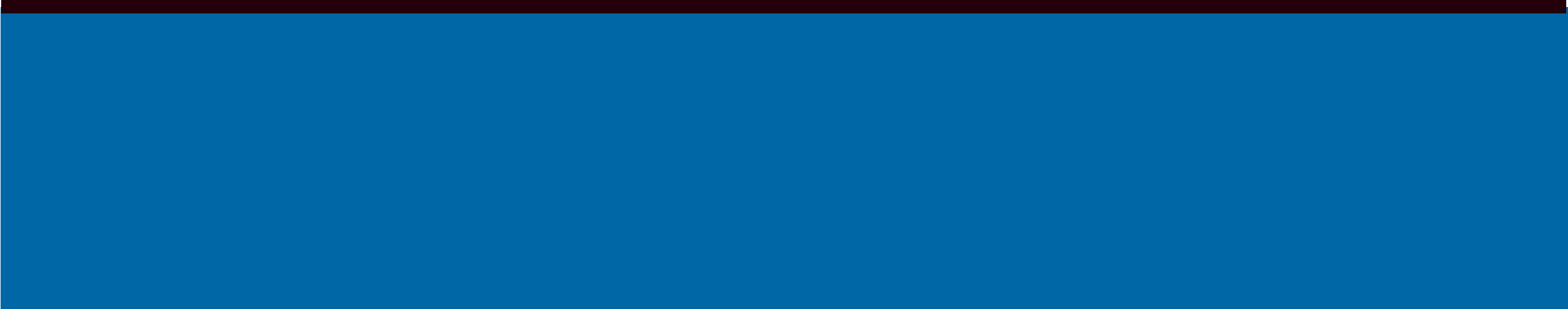

In April 2000, the Commission on Human Rights adopted a resolution to establish the **Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues** during **the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People**. Three months later, the Economic and Social Council endorsed the resolution, and the Permanent Forum came into formal existence.

The Permanent Forum is now an advisory body to the Economic and Social Council with a mandate to discuss indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. According to its mandate, the Permanent Forum will:

- provide expert advice and recommendations on indigenous issues to the Council, as well as to programmes, funds and agencies of the United Nations, through the Council,
- raise awareness and promote the integration and coordination of activities related to indigenous issues within the UN system, and
- prepare and disseminate information on indigenous issues.

The Permanent Forum holds one two-week session annually. The meetings take place in New York or Geneva, or another location, as decided by the members of the Forum.

The Second Session is being held in New York from 12 -23 May 2003.





# INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Indigenous peoples first formally approached the international community in 1923, when Cayuga Chief Deskaheh, speaker of the Iroquois, went to Geneva, to the League of Nations, to appeal for help for his people. He spent more than a year there, but finally was turned away unheard by the League, although not unheard by the Swiss people. A few months before his death in 1925, Chief Deskaheh made his last speech by radio in Rochester, New York. The following is an excerpt:

“This is the story of the Mohawks, the story of the Oneidas, of the Cayugas — I am a Cayuga — of the Onondagas, the Senecas, and the Tuscaroras. They are the Iroquois. Tell it to those who have not been listening. Maybe I will be stopped from telling it. But if I am prevented from telling it over, as I hope I do, the story will not be lost. I have already told it to thousands of listeners in Europe. It has gone into the records where your children can find it when I may be dead or be in jail for daring to tell the truth. I have told this story in Switzerland. They have free speech in little Switzerland. One can tell the truth over there in public, even if it is uncomfortable for some great people.

This story comes straight from Deskaheh, one of the chiefs of the Cayugas. I am the speaker of the Council of the Six Nations, the oldest League of Nations now existing. It was founded by Hiawatha. It is a League which is still alive and intends, as best it can, to defend the rights of the Iroquois to live under their own laws in their own little countries now left to them, to worship their Great Spirit in their own way, and to enjoy the rights which are as surely theirs as the white man's rights are his own.”

Although he continued to plead for his cause unsuccessfully until his death, Chief Deskaheh continues to inspire younger generations today.

In 1925, a delegation from New Zealand visited the League of Nations, led by T. W. Ratana, a well known Maori religious leader. They had no better success than Chief Deskaheh. Both men had come to the League of Nations looking for help for their peoples, when important agreements with their nations had been broken. When agreements or contracts with indigenous peoples were broken, to whom could they go for redress of grievances?

The League of Nations ceased to exist before World War II. Following the war, the United Nations was quickly established, and Chiefs of the Six-Nation Iroquois Confederacy were in attendance at the dedication of its New York headquarters in 1949. Indigenous peoples have been attending and participating in United Nations meetings since the 1970s, but indigenous voices have not spoken for indigenous peoples as full-fledged members of a UN body until the establishment of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in the 21st century.