

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

10 August 2020

Remarks by Anne Nuorgam, Chair, UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Mr. Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs,

Indigenous Elders, sisters and brothers,

Distinguished Panelists,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to join you today for the 2020 commemoration of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

Since it first emerged earlier this year, COVID-19 continues to disrupt our lives as never before. A small example is that we could not hold the annual session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in April this year as planned.

Already marginalized, indigenous communities worldwide are facing additional problems with food shortages, lost livelihoods, and of course, illness and death.

Indigenous women are facing severe hardships in providing for their families during this pandemic, and there are reports of food shortages in many communities. An additional factor is that the lockdowns have exposed indigenous women and girls to heightened risks of gender-based violence.

Our indigenous elders are the guardians of history, traditions, languages and cultures and are particularly vulnerable. They deserve special attention to safeguard and prevent bio-cultural loss.

COVID-19 has also impacted indigenous children and their education – especially those located in remote areas - with no access to distance learning tools. They are experiencing an ever-increasing digital divide. I worry that the pandemic will place indigenous children even further behind.

Indigenous peoples continue to do what they have done for centuries – adapting to change while maintaining their cultures and traditional ways of life. They are taking action and finding their own unique solutions during this global pandemic. Their resilience in overcoming these challenges serves as an inspiration to us all.

Many countries around the world have adopted social distancing and quarantine policies. Since time immemorial, indigenous peoples have used similar practices in times of epidemics or other disasters. Indigenous communities in Bangladesh and Indonesia have imposed lockdowns to minimize

the spread of the coronavirus, while indigenous communities in Belize are applying their own traditional governance systems to establish border control points.

Indigenous peoples are also using social media on how to deal with the pandemic in indigenous languages - in Amazigh, Chakma, Guna, Gurung, Kankaney, Quechua, Munda and Nama to mention a few.

Many Governments' responses to COVID-19 have been slow, with little attention to the particular situation of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples continue to experience threats from extractive industries and the presence of illegal miners and loggers encroaching on their territory – a practice which in some countries such as Brazil has intensified during the global pandemic.

COVID-19 has forcefully illustrated that indigenous peoples know best how to protect their communities and decide and determine what steps must be taken. Traditional knowledge systems – plants and herbs to strengthen resilience, traditional fishing and agriculture for food security - are vital tools for indigenous peoples' survival during these unprecedented times.

Governments must ensure the participation of indigenous peoples in decision-making. Any post-COVID-19 reconstruction activities and programmes should include targeted support for indigenous peoples, to strengthen their traditional livelihoods and economies, and sustain their identities and cultures.

In order to ultimately win the battle against COVID-19, indigenous self-determination is vital. Autonomy and self-government are key to managing our lands, territories and resources and ways of life for sustainable development that is equitable and just, for all peoples and the planet.

This global pandemic is a rare opportunity to build back a better post-COVID-19 society. An opportunity to create a world in which indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge, practices, innovation and resilience are valued – and national development priorities include the rights and self-determined priorities of indigenous peoples. This can only be achieved if we work together.

Thank you.