

*Check Against Delivery*

**Pre-Sessional Meeting of the United Nations Permanent Forum on**

**Indigenous Issues**

**Brazzaville, Republic of Congo**

**14 March 2012**

**Closing** Statement by Grand Chief Edward John

Chairperson of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Distinguished members of Cabinet, Parliamentarians and Senators  
Respected Ambassadors and Heads of Diplomatic Missions  
Expert Members of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues,  
Distinguished participants from the UN system, indigenous  
Peoples, NGOs and civil society organizations,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my, and my colleagues', honour to be here at the closing session of  
the UN Permanent Forum's Pre-sessional Meeting in Brazzaville.

On behalf of the Expert Members of the UN Permanent Forum and its  
Secretariat I wish to extend our deepest thanks to the Government of the  
Republic of Congo for your invitation and being the generous host for  
our meetings.

As the incumbent chair, I want you to understand that each of the 16  
members of the Permanent Forum are independent experts, who serve  
for a term of 3 years, in a voluntary capacity. The depth of their skills,  
knowledge and commitment is absolutely exceptional.

For all of us this has been an inspirational experience. We can truly say we have enjoyed our time in Brazzaville, especially the warmth of the people, the hospitable weather and of course the excellent cuisine.

At the opening of this session we listened carefully to the important welcome comments made on behalf of his Excellency the President of the Republic of Congo including:

- the mobilization of Indigenous peoples globally to fight for and establish new international normative standards to recognize and respect the human rights of Indigenous peoples;
- of the important commitment by the Republic of Congo to ratify Convention No. 169 of ILO;
- of the desperate need in Congo to change social norms to improve the quality of Indigenous peoples wherever they live;
- the establishment of critically necessary national legislation and national action plans and programs to realize the necessary changes;
- respecting the practical necessity to ensure Indigenous participation in this process;

-the support for partners such as UN agencies and NGOs who provide much needed services to Indigenous peoples;

-of the determined efforts by the Republic of Congo, with the participation of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations of African Union and of FIPAC, to mobilize States in the Congo Basin as a significant step for State mobilization on the Africa continent and to ensure their involvement in the September 2014 World Conference on Indigenous Peoples.

The President provided a remarkable contextual statement in the opening remarks under which initiatives in Congo proceed:

"The social despicable aspect of slavery led to its abolition in the nineteenth century and (its) final sentence by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 1948, as much as the discrimination of Indigenous Peoples calls for an unconditional international mobilization."

We are all born equal, have a right to be equal to each other into our respective lands, with co-existing and interdependent civilizations and, the incredible gifts from our ancestors such as cultures, philosophies and cosmovision, teachings and languages.

Unfortunately throughout our respective histories some civilizations presumed that theirs was superior and that others were inferior, leading to massive efforts of slavery, colonization and ultimately the taking of lands, including entire continents, from Indigenous Peoples. In Abbayalla, the Americas, it is estimated that some 90% of the population was decimated in the first 100 years of colonization from slavery, diseases and massacres. It was nothing short of genocide. In the 1400s, Popes in Rome through various "papal bulls" provided the necessary moral authority for colonizing European countries to take Indigenous lands, christianize and "civilize" the original inhabitants. We still live with the consequences of this.

In Africa over the last half century we have witnessed States in difficult de-colonizing processes. On other continents Indigenous Peoples, within

the boundaries of nations States, live with the consequences including marginalization, crushing poverty, decimation of languages and limited or no access to resources which provide for their dignity and well being. The decolonization of Indigenous Peoples within the boundaries of decolonized nations states provides both challenges and opportunities.

In this regard we commend the initiative of The President of the Republic of Congo in adopting Law No. 5-2011 of 25 February 2011 **On the Promotion and Protection of Indigenous Populations (Indigenous Rights Law)**, the approval by the National Assembly and the Senate in December 2010 and subsequent promulgation on 25 February in 2011.

This law, the first in Africa, to a large extent is consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Its adoption is an historic development for all indigenous peoples and Congo and provides a valuable framework for improving the situation of

indigenous peoples in Congo and is a source of inspiration for other countries in Africa to take similar action.

We acknowledge the significance and importance of the fact that Republic of Congo was one of the countries which, in 2007, supported the adoption of Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations.

Over the past several days we have had the incredible opportunity to meet with indigenous peoples and organizations (including RENAPAC, IPAC), African Commission, Parliamentarians, various State Ambassadors and United Nations agencies.

In our session with Indigenous peoples we heard about the continuing debilitating social, political and economic disparities they face including what they see as underlying structural causes which give rise to this. They talked about who they are and where they live. They expressed to us the importance of the continued practice of their traditional ways of

life and their concerns about negative impacts of development of lands and resources in the areas where they live.

They also had constructive ideas and recommendations which they believed were necessary for transformative changes to improve their situation including ensuring their direct, full and effective participation in all State and local initiatives relating to education, health, knowledge and skills training, jobs and business opportunities.

From officials in government, including members of Cabinet and Senate, and various international partners and UN agencies we listened to their understanding of the social, political and economic disparities facing Indigenous peoples and the realization that substantive and affirmative steps, such as the government's Indigenous rights law and national action plans, were needed to address this. Where the social, political and economic disparities are deep and widespread then surely measures to deal with these should also be deep and widespread.

Our too short, but intense, dialogue with Parliamentarians was definitely a key opportunity for us to frankly and constructively exchange views and learn about the work of the Parliamentarians and for members of the Permanent Forum to provide international examples of where State and Indigenous peoples, in situations similar to Congo, were able to arrive at long term and substantive solutions. However we have a key message for Parliamentarians and that is: the importance of engaging in the understanding and application of UN on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other international human rights instruments including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples and ILO 169. There will soon be available a handbook for parliamentarians on this.

Our session with the United Nations Country Team and various UN Agencies was extremely informative. We understand better their commitments, challenges and work with the Government and Indigenous peoples (including RENAPAC) on the development and implementation of the National Action Plan for the Improvement of the Quality of Life of Indigenous Peoples for period 2014 – 2015.

Turning to the work of the Permanent Forum, it will convene its twelfth session from May 20-31 at the UN in New York. With more than a decade of experience, the Permanent Forum members have seen the rights of indigenous peoples being increasingly recognized and applied within the international community. However, there is still a long way to go for indigenous peoples' full and effective participation in matters which concern them.

Issues relating to Indigenous Peoples is international in scale and scope. Indigenous peoples number approximately 370 million in the world and live in about 90 countries. But indigenous peoples, in many instances, are an invisible group because they are often part of the poor and the marginalized. Unfortunately, there is not enough understanding of indigenous peoples, their cultures, languages and world views. Who is Indigenous? How many are there and where do they live? And how do they provide for themselves?

For example we understand that in Congo, Indigenous peoples represent about 1.5% to 10% of the total population...an uncertain number because

of lack of good information. A practical solution for better population information would be, with the cooperation and support of Indigenous peoples, for the State to take active measures to register all births including the elevated levels of mortality rates of mothers and children at birth.

Other significant challenges include the lack of access to education, lack of funding for schools in Indigenous communities and education is not provided in indigenous languages. This key aspect of the development of peoples in any society must become an essential State priority.

Each year the Permanent Forum sessions provide a unique opportunity where Government, indigenous peoples and United Nations agencies come together to discuss and find viable solutions and good practices.

One of the highlights of the twelfth session of the Permanent Forum will be the "Half-Day on the African region", which will take place on Thursday 23 May between 3pm -6pm. We encourage Governments and

Indigenous peoples from the African region to attend and participate in the discussions. It is an important opportunity to have a dialogue on those issues which are unique and important to this region.

By way of conclusion, we believe that the Republic of Congo's initiative regarding the Indigenous Rights Laws and proposed new action plan is an inspiration for many countries on the African continent as well as internationally. We also believe the key for better level of successes is to ensure the full, effective and collaborative participation, in accordance with Article 18 of UNDRIP, of indigenous peoples. As well there are many global examples about the kind and level of State-Indigenous Peoples engagement which you may wish to consider in further developments to support and ensure the continued survival and enhance the dignity and well-being of Indigenous peoples in Congo.

In closing, we thank the Government of the Republic of Congo for hosting this Permanent Forum's pre-sessional meeting. For many of us,

this is the first visit to this region and to Congo. We have been treated with utmost respect and diplomacy.

We thank also Marianne Flach, the UN Resident Coordinator for her hard work for this meeting.

Lastly, we extend deepest gratitude and appreciation to our Permanent Forum colleague, Simon William M'Viboudoulou and his exceptional staff and team for their tireless work in organizing our visit. We know Simon has been working day and night to make this meeting a success. We acknowledge him for being a true friend and a brother to all of us.

Merci. Thank You.

