

To the Indigenous People's Global Summit on Climate Change

Anchorage, Alaska, 23 April 2009

H.E. David Choquehuanca, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Plurinational State of Bolivia,
Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Chair of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues,
Patricia Cochran, Chair of the Indigenous Peoples' Global Summit on Climate Change and
Chair, Inuit Circumpolar Council,
Members of the Greenlandic Parliament and Home Rule,
Distinguished Elders,
Sisters and Brothers All,

It is an honour to join you here in Anchorage for this Global Summit of Indigenous Peoples on a defining issue of our time: Climate Change. This is a remarkable event, counting on the participation of representatives of indigenous peoples from around the world, and I welcome the move to integrate indigenous views, policies and deeply held values and visions into the global response to the challenges of global warming.

Indigenous issues at the United Nations are not new. They can be traced back to the 1950s. It is thanks to the persistence of indigenous peoples and support of a range of civil society and governmental advocates that they are taking their rightful place on the international agenda. But we cannot take this progress for granted: Indigenous people everywhere remain vulnerable.

With some 370 million people spread throughout some 90 countries around the world, indigenous peoples are interacting with the larger world more than ever. They are doing so while maintaining their rich cultures and identities as groups, grounded in a common past and aspiring to a common future.

The General Assembly has been in the forefront of addressing these harsh realities. The United Nations has the responsibility and the obligation to promote respect for the human rights of Indigenous peoples and to advocate strongly and systematically for the full participation of Indigenous peoples in development processes at all levels.

In 2005, the General Assembly launched the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People with the goal to "...further strengthen the international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by indigenous people in such areas as culture, education, health, human rights, the environment and social and economic development".

The UN has established new institutions to address these long-neglected issues. These include the Special Rapporteur on the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, represented here by Ms. Tauli-Corpuz, and recently the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

In some parts of the world, democratic participation of indigenous peoples has led indigenous leaders to important positions in government. Perhaps nowhere has this been

more dramatic than in Bolivia where an indigenous labor leader, my dear friend Evo Morales Ayma, has become president. President Evo Morales' deep commitment to advancing the interests of indigenous peoples is reflected by the presence of Bolivia's Foreign Minister here with us today.

After 20 years of negotiations between Member States and representatives of indigenous peoples and human rights organizations, the Human Rights Council adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2006. A year later, the General Assembly adopted the Declaration as well. This historic document constitutes tangible proof of the increasing cooperation of States, indigenous peoples and the international community as a whole for the promotion and protection of the human rights of Indigenous peoples.

Parallel to this growing awareness of indigenous issues, the world is also coming to terms with the problems of global warming and the devastating climate changes that are occurring with greater frequency. This summit is highlighting the links between these parallel trends to explore the role of indigenous peoples in climate change policy. The world is beginning to recognize the importance of traditional knowledge in adaptation to and mitigation of climate change.

Indigenous peoples are among the first to face the direct consequences of climate change due to their usually close relationship with the environment. Their dependence on the delicate balance of our ecosystems highlights the fragility of their relationship with our dear Mother Earth. Climate change exacerbates the difficulties already faced by indigenous communities that I mentioned earlier.

Indigenous peoples are among those who contributed least to the climate change crisis because of their traditional livelihoods and sustainable lifestyles. It is a bitter irony, however, that they are suffering the worst impacts of climate change. They were the ones who made the first clarion call on climate change as they felt the impacts of this on their lands and waters. The indigenous peoples of the Arctic witnessed the unprecedented thawing of permafrost and the melting of their glaciers 30 years ago, even before the world was aware of climate change.

Indigenous peoples have demonstrated their resilience and their capacity to adapt to changes happening in their communities and they have accumulated substantial experience and knowledge in this process. They also have contributed significantly in keeping carbon under the ground as a result of their struggles to stop devastating oil, gas and mineral exploitation. They save the carbon in the trees because of their fights against loggers and deforesters.

Climate change poses threats and dangers to the survival of indigenous communities worldwide, even though they contribute the least to greenhouse emissions. In fact, indigenous peoples are vital to the many ecosystems in their lands and territories and help enhance the resilience of these ecosystems. In addition, indigenous peoples interpret and react to the impacts of climate change in creative ways, drawing on traditional knowledge and other technologies to find solutions that society at large can replicate to counter pending changes.

I appeal to the parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to ensure that the rights of indigenous peoples, as contained in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, be respected and implemented. This includes respecting the right of indigenous peoples to have their free, prior and informed consent obtained before any climate-change-related project is brought into their communities.

We must also ensure that indigenous peoples, who value the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature and have the lightest ecological footprints, participate in designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating climate change policies and programmes at all levels.

Let me close by bringing to your attention an important meeting that is deeply relevant to Indigenous Peoples around the world – indeed to all people who are struggling to have their voices heard in this period of global economic turmoil and hardship. A summit of leaders from all 192 Member States of the General Assembly will meet from 1 to 3 June to address the global economic and financial crisis and its impact on development. While smaller groups of countries have met to resolve the deepening economic and financial crisis, the United Nations is the appropriate forum where the needs and interests of all countries can be taken into account.

In addition to initiating a process of reform and democratization of international financial institutions, I personally hope this meeting will initiate a serious discussion about the global economy as it emerges from this crisis. It is a time for change and for rethinking our relationships with Mother Earth, including our unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. I believe that we need – and most people want – healthy societies that are not driven by hyper-consumerism or the obsessive accumulation of wealth and dominance over others. We need a reorientation of society in the direction of solidarity, social and ecological responsibility, brotherhood and sisterhood.

These are values that have survived within the communities of Indigenous Peoples all over the Earth despite all odds. You are among their strongest and most compelling advocates. Faced with a global crisis that is tipping millions of people into abject poverty each day, I believe the world is now listening. Let us be sure your voices are heard.

Thank you.