



Opening of the United Nations International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples

On December 10, 1992 leaders and delegates of Indigenous communities from around the world convened at the United Nations headquarters in New York City for the official opening of the United Nations International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous leaders held strategy meetings in New York two days prior to the inaugural events to share critical problems and formulate a unified, pro-active platform to take to the U.N. (see declaration, page 6) The meetings were organized by the Continental Coordinating Commission of Indigenous Nations and hosted by the Native American Council of New York City.

During the morning General Assembly Plenary Meeting on December 10, the President General as well as representatives of Member States made official U.N. declarations regarding the role of the United Nations in "promoting and protecting the human rights of Indigenous peoples", and how the aim of the International Year is to focus attention on the special situations and needs of Indigenous peoples.

The Plenary meeting was then adjourned, to be continued by statements of Indigenous speakers. Unfortunately, few members of the General Assembly returned to attend the continuation of the opening ceremonies, and the diverse list of Indig-

enous speakers scheduled for the afternoon addressed a relatively empty assembly hall. Despite the absence of many U.N. officials, the meeting had historic importance, as it was the first time Indigenous peoples were allowed to address the U.N.

Speakers representing 20 Indigenous nations called on world leaders to halt the genocide of their peoples and the destruction of their lands. The speeches raised common concerns, including invasion and exploitation of Indigenous lands; pollution of air, water and land; violation of religious freedom and human rights; protection of Indigenous cultures and languages; and Indigenous self-determination of economic development.

"The most serious problems confronting Indigenous Peoples are the progressive expropriation of our lands and territories, the irrational exploitation of soil and subsoil, and the destruction and contamination of ecosystems which maintain the equilibrium of life," said Noeli Pocaterria Uliana, of the Wayuu nation of Venezuela. Many of the other Indigenous speakers also emphasized the relationship between ecological concerns and Indigenous concerns. In the words of Davi Yanomami, a representative of the Yanomami people of the Amazon:

Our word is to protect nature, the wind, the mountain, the forest, and the animals. This is what we want to teach you. The

1993 YEAR OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES



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Indigenous delegates meet to formulate a unified platform prior to United Nations ceremony. From left: Margarito Ruiz, Maya (Mexico); Marcial Arias, Kuna (Panamá); Domingo Raien, Mapuche (Chile), unidentified Mapuche (Chile)

leaders in the rich, industrialized world think that they are the owners of the world. But the shaboris (shamans) are the ones who have true knowledge. They are the real first world. And if their knowledge is destroyed, then the white people too will die. It will be the end of the world. This is what we want to avoid.

SAIC attended this historic event as a supporter of the inherent right of Indig-

enous peoples to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Yet the fact that this significant presence of Indigenous chiefs, political and spiritual leaders at the United Nations received little local, national or international press coverage bears witness to the fact that once again, the Indigenous peoples of the world were not treated with due respect.

UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

In July of 1993, the UN's Working Group on Indigenous Populations is expected to approve the final draft of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which they have been working on for 10 years with the participation of Indigenous peoples from all over the world. The draft will then be submitted for approval to all of the member nations of the UN. If enough support is built, the Declaration will then be adopted by the General Assembly, and become an important instrument for protecting Indigenous rights.

We encourage individuals and organizations to help build support for the Declaration. You can educate yourself and others about the Declaration, circulate information among other peace and social justice organizations, and write to members of Congress and to the President. Copies of the current draft of the Declaration can be ordered from SAIC for a small fee to cover copying, postage, and handling costs. To find out more background information, contact:

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