



WORLD CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS: FEW REAL ACTIONS TO REDRESS INJURIES

Even though Indigenous rights were a key topic on the agenda of the UN World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna this past June, the results were disappointing as the symbolic attention of the International Year of Indigenous Peoples failed to yield concrete actions.

Hundreds of Indigenous representatives came to the conference with their concerns and demands which they presented to the 179 government delegates and thousands of non-governmental observers.

Aucan Huilcaman, a Mapuche activist representing the Continental Commission of Indigenous Nations (CONIC) was chosen to address the World Conference. Topping the list of recommendations were demands for recognition of territorial rights and the right to self-determination. Huilcaman's speech emphasized Indigenous peoples' right to administer their legally recognized territory and to choose and implement a development policy according to their own cultural beliefs and values. In addition, the statement called for states to ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) Covenant 169.

Also called for by the Indigenous representatives was the recognition of Indigenous groups as distinct "peoples" rather than "people" who are considered minorities within a national population. The cultural continuity

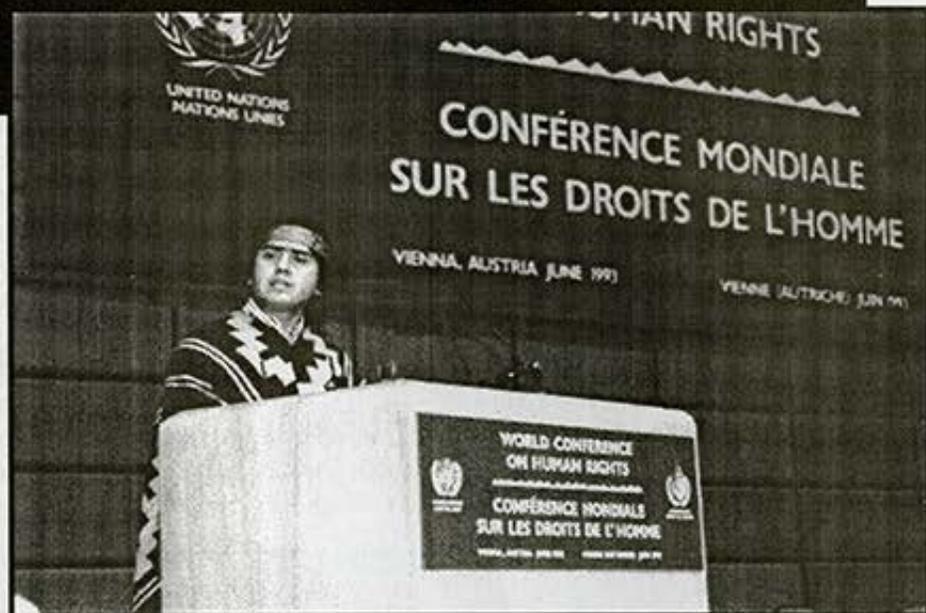


photo SAIC

Aucan Huilcaman addresses representatives and thousands of observers in Vienna

and historic claim to the land distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other minorities. The addition of the "s" which aims to emphasize Indigenous collective rights proved to be a point of controversy at the conference as many member governments fear that Indigenous groups will interpret and use these rights to establish independent states.

Indigenous activists submitted a recommended text for the final declaration urging that "Indigenous peoples be recognized with inherent, distinctive, collective rights, including the right to self-determination, self government and autonomy." However, the Vienna Declaration on human rights contains only one half page devoted to "indigenous people" in which the issues mentioned above are not considered.

Among the few points made by the World Conference is the recommendation that "advisory services and technical assistance programs within the UN system respond positively to requests by states for assistance

which would be of direct benefit to indigenous people." The conference also "urges states to ensure the full participation of indigenous people in all aspects of society..." Another key recommendation calls for the establishment of an International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, to begin from January 1994, and the creation of a Voluntary Trust Fund for this purpose. Finally, the establishment of a permanent forum for Indigenous peoples at the UN is to be considered.

Although Indigenous issues have gained international prominence in the course of 1993, the International Year of Indigenous Peoples, there has been much frustration about the lack of real changes in the interactions between nation-states and Indigenous nations. The recommendations adopted in the Vienna Declaration represent, at best, a weak version of the UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that does not address the fundamental rights to autonomy and self-determination.