

9 August 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Jan Kavan,
President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly,
on the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples,
Indigenous Children and Youth**

This year the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples calls for a special celebration as it is dedicated to the indigenous children and youth. They are the repositories of the traditional knowledge and wisdom gathered by their forefathers over centuries. Their welfare and nurturing matters as they will in turn nurture, maintain and pass on their rich cultural heritage to their progeny.

There are 370 million known indigenous peoples in 70 countries. A majority of the 6000 languages and cultures correspond to the indigenous peoples of the world. They contribute the rare and precious colours and patterns in the tapestry of the human species. The indigenous peoples also constitute the biodiversity in the human race. Their presence is a manifestation of peaceful co-existence in harmony with nature, the environment and other communities. They have acquired a deep understanding of the workings of ecological balances and thus have contributed to the sum total of human knowledge and experience.

They have been long and patient in their struggle to gain recognition for their survival in our modernizing and materialistic world. When the League of Nations met in 1924, Chief Deskaheh of the Council of Six Nations of the Iroquois of the USA was there to plead for the recognition of the rights and aspirations of his people. After years of disappointment a real impetus was gained through the Martinez Cabo Study (1981-1984) which was eloquent in its appeal to the international community to support the cause of the indigenous peoples.

As we all know the formative years of a child are crucial to his/her development and prospects. The children and youth of the indigenous peoples are especially vulnerable as their communities have been isolated, marginalized and excluded from the main stream of national life. They have to overcome the language and cultural barriers to be accepted and to have access to education, health care, and a presence in the economic and political life of the countries they inhabit. The UN System (ILO, UNICEF, UNDP) together with civil society advocacy groups have worked ceaselessly to further the welfare and visibility of the indigenous peoples and youth. Last year the UN established a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York under the auspices of ECOSOC. This Forum is dedicated to promote the recognition and the rights of the indigenous peoples which are enshrined explicitly and implicitly in the various universal declarations on human rights and conventions.

I urge Member States to honour the diversity of their populations and provide specific support to the vulnerable indigenous communities. We pay homage to all those who have supported the

cause of the indigenous peoples. Their efforts have borne fruit and this issue now has a place in the international global agenda. Let us pledge to work together for their integration into the mainstream of our national activities.