

21 May 2004

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte,
President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Third Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on
Indigenous Issues**

Mr. Chairperson, Distinguished Members of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am greatly encouraged that the priorities we have set for the Presidency of the Fifty-eighth session of the United Nations - Development, United Nations Reform, and Peace and Security - are all in accord with issues of concern to this Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

I was pleased, therefore, to accept the invitation of the Chairperson to participate in the Opening Ceremony of this third Session of the Permanent Forum, even as I look forward to receiving reports on its deliberations and conclusions. Regrettably, circumstances did not permit me to participate in the Opening Ceremony. I am therefore pleased to have the opportunity to address you now, for which I thank your Chairperson.

I have been following the Permanent Forum's deliberations over the course of its session. Every indication is that you have taken a dynamic and practical approach to your work, bearing in mind that successful policy-making and implementation requires careful consideration of the issues, well-conceived strategies and an effective management process to achieve agreed objectives.

In my view, your accomplishments underscore the value of this important Permanent Forum to the goals and aspirations of the world's indigenous peoples.

I am mindful of the prominent role that indigenous peoples themselves play in this Permanent Forum, which puts them at the forefront in representing their own interests, articulating their concerns and proposing solutions to resolve them.

In this Permanent Forum - charged with advising the Economic and Social Council on issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights - a sober evaluation of the situation of Indigenous peoples comes more clearly into focus. It is evident from this evaluation that the world's indigenous peoples face many threats and challenges.

We must concede that today, too many indigenous peoples confront challenges in respect of their land, their culture, their language, their livelihood and indeed, their very existence. Poverty, racial discrimination and endemic diseases are also a fact of life for many. Too many remain on the outside of the national decision-making that affects their daily lives.

The decision of this Permanent Forum to focus on a particularly vulnerable group, "Indigenous Women", at this session is both appropriate and timely. I believe that the launching of the "Indigenous Women" theme at the high-level panel and dialogue caused us to look realistically and pragmatically at the situation of indigenous women, - women whom we saw as essential actors in economic and social processes. We saw them as agents of change. We saw them as both the agents and beneficiaries of the goals and objectives of the Beijing Platform of Action. We recognised their contribution in all spheres of life of their societies and communities. At the same time, we saw their many vulnerabilities - marginalisation, extreme poverty, discrimination, other human rights violations including violence against them, - all these impact especially heavily on indigenous women.

We must recognise indigenous women for their significant contribution to their societies and communities, so that as states and the global community, we can take the critical decisions on their behalf that will ensure gender equality.

The United Nations system has taken decisive steps to emphasise inclusiveness in respect of indigenous peoples, to the benefit of all. In fact, the United Nations has played an important role in the unique partnership being built among member states, indigenous peoples and the United Nations system.

Consideration of the more than thirty years of United Nations activities delivers a powerful statement on how the organization views the rights of the 370 million indigenous peoples living in 70 countries worldwide.

The ongoing initiatives of the Working Group on Indigenous Population, the proclamation of 1993 as the International Year of Indigenous peoples and the International Decade of Indigenous peoples 1995-2004 and this Permanent Forum, created in 2002, have given direction to the United Nations work and established cooperation between indigenous peoples and the organisation.

Now, as the Decade comes to a close, indigenous peoples can be assured that this Permanent Forum, strategically placed, will work for continuity and progress.

When the Commission on Human Rights completes the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, it will be a specific international instrument that together with other general instruments on human right and fundamental freedoms and related issues, should promote and protect the rights of indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples should also benefit from the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals; and the review of 2005 and 2015 will tell if the international community is meeting its commitments in this regard.

As President of the General Assembly, I am pleased with the role the Assembly has played over the years in promoting the rights of indigenous peoples. I recall, in this regard, the historic opening of the General Assembly Hall to indigenous leaders for the first time in December 1992 for the launch of the International Year and again in 1994 for the launch of the International Decade.

Indigenous peoples can rely on the General Assembly, called "House of Mica" by an ancient Hopi prophecy, to continue to welcome them in good faith, celebrate their civilizations, listen to their voices and learn from them.

Let me conclude by commending the Chairperson and all members of this Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues for your resolve in carrying out your mandate as the global mechanism for monitoring the situation of indigenous peoples around the world. You have a unique mission - to create a setting in which we can all walk together on a path to a better world and "to enjoy better standards of life in larger freedoms", as extolled in the Charter.

I thank you.