

## UNICEF chief joins call for greater protection of indigenous people



A participant at the 7th session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (file photo)

10 August 2009 – The world’s 370 million indigenous people remain among the most vulnerable members of our societies, warned the head of the United Nations Children’s Fund (**UNICEF**), joining a chorus of UN officials voicing their concerns as the world body observes the **International Day of the World’s Indigenous People** today.

“Many indigenous peoples live in conditions that make them especially vulnerable to the spread of HIV,” said UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman in a **message** marking the Day.

“Yet efforts to monitor the epidemic among indigenous peoples are often lacking, as are examples of interventions informed by local participation,” added Ms. Veneman.

**Many indigenous peoples live in conditions that make them especially vulnerable to the spread of HIV**

Ms. Veneman stressed that the forces driving the HIV epidemic in indigenous communities must be identified and understood to develop effective educational programmes.

“Health education is essential to preventing the transmission of HIV and AIDS,” she said, adding that differing “indigenous beliefs, practices and sensitivities about illness, sex and reproduction will have an impact on the success of that health education in indigenous communities.”

Indigenous women, in particular, suffer disproportionately from a number of socio-economic difficulties that increase the spread of the disease, including poverty, marginalization, homelessness and poor access to education, noted the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in a news release.

Meanwhile Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon pointed to the role played by malnutrition, environmental contamination and inadequate health care in the spread of HIV/AIDS among indigenous people.

He underscored the importance for indigenous people to have the “information and infrastructure necessary for detection, treatment and protection,” in a **message** read by Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro during a ceremony at UN Headquarters in New York.

The UN expert on human rights for indigenous people, James Anaya, applauded efforts to raise awareness on the issues since the 2007 General Assembly adoption of the landmark Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, noting that much work remained to make the content of the text a reality in the everyday lives of indigenous peoples around the world.

“There have been heightened tensions at the local level in certain cases, at times erupting in alarming surges of violence against indigenous peoples,” said Mr. Anaya, the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people.

However he was encouraged by his trip to Nepal at the end of 2008 to assess the human rights situation of the Adivasi Janajati, analyzing the ongoing process of constitution-making and political transition.

While noting progress made by the Government, Mr. Anaya highlighted a number of ongoing human rights concerns related to a history of discrimination against the Adivasi Janajati, in a report he will present to the 12th session of the Human Rights Council in September.

Next week, Mr. Anaya will head off on a 12-day trip to investigate and report on the major challenges faced by indigenous peoples of Australia, he said in a news release.

**News Tracker: past stories on this issue**

Low health standards impeding indigenous rights – Ban