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## UN urges greater protection of the world's indigenous communities



Portrait of a woman from the Ndebele tribe in Kwadlulale Market, South Africa

9 August 2010 – Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today urged the world to step up efforts to improve living conditions of the planet's indigenous communities and to protect them, saying they continued to suffer discrimination and poverty despite a United Nations declaration that aims to promote their rights.

"Indigenous peoples still experience racism, poor health and disproportionate poverty," Mr. Ban said in a [message](#) to mark the [International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples](#). "In many societies, their languages, religions and cultural traditions are stigmatized and shunned," the Secretary-General added.

He pointed out that the first-ever UN report on the State of the World's Indigenous Peoples in January this year came up with alarming statistics. In some countries, indigenous peoples are 600 times more likely to contract tuberculosis than the general population. In others, an indigenous child can expect to die 20 years before his or her non-indigenous compatriots.

Mr. Ban said that the landmark UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the General Assembly in 2007, laid out a framework for governments to use in strengthening relationships with indigenous peoples and protecting their human rights.

"Since then, we have seen more governments working to redress social and economic injustices, through legislation and other means, and indigenous peoples'

issues have become more prominent on the international agenda than ever before," Mr. Ban added.

In her **statement**, the UN High Commissioner for **Human Rights**, Navi Pillay, stressed that the gap between the principles of the declaration and the reality remains wide, with indigenous peoples continuing to suffer discrimination, marginalization in health and education, extreme poverty, disregard for their environmental concerns, displacement from their traditional lands and exclusion from participation in decision-making processes.

"It is particularly disconcerting that those who work to correct these wrongs are, all too often, persecuted for their human rights advocacy," she said.

Ms. Pillay, however, pointed out that: "We have cause to celebrate the progress made in turning human rights into a reality for indigenous peoples, but this International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is also an occasion to recall that there is no room for complacency."

The focus of this year's International Day is indigenous filmmakers, who have given the world insights into their communities, cultures and history. The filmmakers have chronicled the belief systems and philosophies of indigenous communities, as well as their daily lives.

The UN independent expert on the rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples, James Anaya, **said** the communities continued to endure oppression.

"Indigenous peoples continue to see their traditional lands invaded by powerful actors seeking wealth at their expense, thereby depriving them of life-sustaining resources," said Mr. Anaya, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples.

He called for the implementation of the Declaration by governments, the UN system and other concerned authorities. States, he added, should engage in comprehensive reviews of their existing legislation and administrative programmes to identify where they may be incompatible with the Declaration.

The Secretary-General noted that the world's indigenous peoples were responsible for the preservation of vast amounts of humanity's cultural history, and spoke a majority of the world's languages. They had also inherited and passed on a wealth of knowledge, artistic forms and religious and cultural traditions.

"As we celebrate these contributions, I call on governments and civil society to fulfil their commitment to advancing the status of indigenous peoples everywhere," the Secretary-General said.

Ms. Pillay said she was encouraged by the fact that in a number of countries, new tools have been created to give voice to indigenous peoples in decision-making and to stamp out human rights violations. "We are also encouraged by the fact that support for the declaration keeps expanding, including in the countries that originally voted against this remarkable document," she added.

“We need to bring the rights and dignity of those who are suffering most to the centre of our efforts. This requires changes in practices, but we also need improved laws and institutions, without which advances are not sustainable.

“On this International Day, let us reaffirm our commitment to translate the words of the declaration into effective action. Keeping this promise is our obligation,” Ms. Pillay said.

The Executive Director of the UN Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)), Anthony Lake, highlighted the disparities in the welfare and health of children born into indigenous communities compared to other children.

“The best way to celebrate the International Day of the World’s Indigenous People is to intensify our efforts to ensure that all children have an equal chance to fulfil their potential, and to encourage all societies to embrace the diversity which so greatly enriches the human family of which we are all part,” he said in a statement.

The work of filmmakers from indigenous communities around the world was being highlighted to mark the International Day, the UN Development Programme ([UNDP](#)) noted. Four such films were shown today at UN Headquarters in New York.

One of the films, *Sikumi ( On The Ice)*, by director Andrew Okpeaha MacLean, tells the story of an Inuit hunter who drives his dog team out on the frozen Arctic Ocean off the coast of Alaska in search of seals, but instead becomes a witness to murder.

Another film, *Curte-Nillas*, from Sweden, is a short animation on a superhero’s efforts to protect and defend the rights of the Sámi people in a struggle with authorities. *Marangmotxingo Mirang or From The Ikpeng Children To The World*, from Brazil, and *Taino Indians Counted Out Of Existence*, from Puerto Rico, explore cultural heritage and revive hidden histories.

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