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United States' backing for indigenous rights treaty hailed at UN



Colombian indigenous children in jungle settlements in Panama [File Photo]

17 December 2010 – The announcement by President Barack Obama that the United States supports the landmark United Nations treaty outlining the rights of the world's estimated 370 million indigenous peoples was hailed today at the world body.

The US was one of only four countries – along with Canada, Australia and New Zealand – that voted against the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples when it was adopted by the General Assembly in September 2007, a move that followed more than two decades of debate.

With its announcement, the US has now joined the other three countries in endorsing the treaty – a non-binding text that sets out the individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples, as well as their rights to culture, identity, language, employment, health, education and other issues.

“This is an important milestone that signifies that the international community has reached consensus on the Declaration,” Tonya Gonella Frichner, the Vice-Chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, said in a statement.

Ms. Frichner added that she looked forward to working with the US and other countries toward full implementation of the Declaration with no reservations.

In addition, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, James Anaya, issued a statement saying he is “elated” at the US announcement, calling it a “groundbreaking development” for Native Americans and all those who seek greater protection for human rights across the globe.

“With its endorsement of the Declaration, the United States strengthens its stated commitment to improve the conditions of Native Americans and to address broken promises. Indigenous peoples can now look to the Declaration as a means of holding the United States to that commitment,” said Mr. Anaya, who reports to the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council in an independent and unpaid capacity.

The Declaration emphasizes the rights of indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions and to pursue their development in keeping with their own needs and aspirations.

It also prohibits discrimination against indigenous peoples and promotes their full and effective participation in all matters that concern them, and their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own visions of economic and social development.

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