

Violence against women, property rights most pressing indigenous issues – UN expert



Special Rapporteur James Anaya. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

18 September 2012 – Violence against women and girls and the indiscriminate extraction of natural resources are among the most pressing issues that indigenous peoples face today, a United Nations human rights expert said today.

“A recurring issue that has come to my attention in various contexts is that of violence against indigenous women and girls,” said the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, James Anaya, in his statement to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

In the past year, Mr. Anaya has collaborated with various countries, UN agencies and indigenous peoples in several studies and country assessments on the challenges indigenous peoples face on

a daily basis. He has also made recommendations to States of good practices and responded to cases of alleged human rights violations.

Indigenous self-determination and cultural integrity must be enhanced, along with efforts that are designed to prevent and punish violence against indigenous women and girls.

Mr. Anaya said that in his talks with representatives on indigenous issues, they had stressed the need for a holistic approach to combat violence against indigenous women and girls. The implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, he stressed, will be crucial to address this issue.

Adopted by the General Assembly in September 2007 after more than two decades of debate, the Declaration 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.

“In particular, indigenous self-determination and cultural integrity must be enhanced, along with efforts that are designed to prevent and punish violence against indigenous women and girls,” he said.

Mr. Anaya also pointed to the extractive industries as a source of tension, as companies do not tend to consult with indigenous peoples before beginning work on their property.

“There is now a common, often narrow focus on principles of consultation and free, prior and informed consent,” he said. “A better approach starts with examination of the primary substantive rights of indigenous peoples that may be implicated in natural resource extraction.

“These include, in particular, rights to property over land and natural resources; rights to culture, religion, and health; and the right of indigenous peoples to set and pursue their own priorities for development, as part of their fundamental right to self-determination.”

One of the fundamental problems with the current model in the extractive industries, Mr. Anaya said, was that extractive projects are developed by corporations with some or little involvement from Governments, but without participation from indigenous communities which are greatly affected by these initiatives. Greater participation and control would bring benefits to the indigenous population, he added.

During his statement Mr. Anaya also presented his reports on the situation of indigenous peoples in Argentina and the United States, reiterating that while positive steps have been taken by both governments to advance indigenous rights, much more remains to be done.