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Debate on indigenous peoples and forests among highlights of annual UN forum



Indigenous boomerangs in the rain forest of Australia

30 April 2010 – The relationship between indigenous peoples and forests was among the major issues discussed during a two-week forum at United Nations Headquarters that wrapped up today, with participants voicing concern about the impact on lives and livelihoods of deforestation, extraction activities and large-scale building projects.

The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is “still very much concerned about the continuing eviction of indigenous peoples from their forests,” said Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, a member of the Forum since 2005 and former chairperson.

“This issue is really a very emotional issue for indigenous peoples, especially indigenous peoples in tropical rainforest countries.”

Ms. Tauli-Corpuz, an indigenous activist belonging to the Kankana-ey Igorot peoples of the Philippines, told a news conference that evictions were taking place in many indigenous communities due to the expansion of bio-fuel plantations, conservation programmes such as national parks, wildlife reserves and biosphere reserves, and the expansion of extractive industry operations.

Next year is the International Year of Forests, and the Permanent Forum has to play a very active role to present cases from around the world, said Ms. Tauli-Corpuz, who has been appointed by the Forum to prepare a special report on indigenous peoples and forests.

Carlos Mamani, the Chairperson of the Permanent Forum, said the 16-member body will be adopting recommendations on the issue of indigenous peoples and forests which it will then forward to next year's session of the UN Forum on Forests.

"The forests of indigenous peoples have suffered nefarious consequences due to extraction activities but also because of colonialism," he noted.

At its current session, the Forum also voiced its grave concern about the increasing expansion of the building of mega-hydroelectric dams.

"We call on States to implement the World Commission on Dams report, which contains many of the standards that we think States should adhere to, in particular that the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples should be obtained before any dam project is designed or brought into their communities," said Ms. Tauli-Corpuz.

New Zealand's announcement on the opening day last week that it is reversing its decision and supporting the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples was another highlight of the current session.

The landmark document outlines the rights of the world's estimated 370 million indigenous people in areas such as culture, identity, language, employment, health and education, and outlaws discrimination against them.

New Zealand was one of four countries – the others being Australia, Canada and the United States – that voted against the declaration in 2007. Australia reversed its decision last year.

Mr. Mamani said the Permanent Forum welcomed in particular the announcement by the United States that it will begin the process of reviewing the declaration with a view to supporting it, as well as a statement from Canada along the same lines.

Some 2,000 indigenous representatives convened in New York to take part in the Permanent Forum's ninth session, which focused on the theme of "Development with Culture and Identity."

The Permanent Forum comprises 16 independent experts, who function in their personal capacities and serve for a term of three years. Eight of the members are nominated by governments and eight are nominated directly by indigenous organizations in their regions.

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