

## Low health standards impeding recognition of indigenous peoples' rights – Ban



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

9 August 2009 – The low standards of health among indigenous communities is perpetuating the gap in many countries between the recognition of their rights and the actual situation on the ground, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today, calling for swift action to find solutions.

In his **message** on the International Day of the World's Indigenous People, the Secretary-General appealed to governments and civil society “to act with urgency and determination to close this implementation gap, in full partnership with indigenous peoples.”

This year's Day focuses on the threat posed by HIV and AIDS, and Mr. Ban underscored the importance of indigenous people having access to the information and services needed for detection, treatment and prevention.

This marginalized group – numbering 370 million in 70 countries – suffers disproportionately from low health standards linked to poverty, malnutrition, environmental contamination and inadequate healthcare, he said.

Calling the world's indigenous peoples the “custodians of some of the most biologically diverse areas on Earth” who speak a majority of all languages, the Secretary-General welcomed some recent national moves in which governments have apologized for past injustices, while others have adopted legal reforms.

But he cautioned that “many face discrimination and racism on a daily basis,” as well as poverty and inadequate access to education.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said the International Day is an occasion to reaffirm the commitment to translate positive developments in international human rights standards into concrete progress for indigenous peoples.

“To achieve this, we all – States, indigenous peoples, the United Nations system and others concerned – must join our efforts and reach solutions based on true dialogue, mutual understanding, tolerance and respect for human rights,” she noted in a statement.

"This is no easy task. But it is the only way we can move the rights of indigenous peoples from paper to practice."

Ms. Pillay, in an opinion piece published today in *The Hindu*, stressed that the world's indigenous peoples need and deserve more than just symbolic celebrations on 9 August. "After centuries of repression, they need comprehensive tools to defend their human rights, their way of life, and their aspirations."

One such tool, she noted, is the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Adopted in 2007, the Declaration underscores the right of indigenous peoples to all social and health services, and to the enjoyment of the highest standards of physical and mental health.

"We must step up our common efforts to make the Declaration something more than a mere pledge of intent. We must translate its letter and spirit into concrete change, change that can be felt in indigenous peoples' daily life."

In 1994, the General Assembly proclaimed 9 August – the anniversary of the first meeting in 1982 of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations of the Subcommission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights – to be the International Day of the World's Indigenous People.

It will be commemorated this year at UN Headquarters in New York tomorrow with cultural events and panel discussions.