

Cultural Survival

Victory for Indigenous Peoples

New York - September 13, 2007- At long last, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is a reality. It was adopted today by the United Nations General Assembly by a vote of 143 to 4 with 11 abstentions. The declaration spells out the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples including their right to their traditional lands and resources; their right to give their free, prior, and informed consent before governments take actions that negatively affect them; their right to be free from genocide and forced relocation; and their rights to their languages, cultures and spiritual beliefs. At long last the world's native peoples have a valuable tool for regaining some of the cultural and physical ground they have lost over the past 500 years. "Today, by adopting the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples we are making further progress to improve the situation of indigenous peoples around the world," stated General Assembly President Haya Al Khalifa. "We are also taking another major step forward towards the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all." Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warmly welcomed the adoption, calling it "a triumph for indigenous peoples around the world." He further noted that "this marks a historic moment when UN Member States and indigenous peoples reconciled with their painful histories and resolved to move forward together on the path of human rights, justice and development for all." Today's happy moment did not come easily. The declaration underwent a longer period of debate and negotiation--25 years all told--than any other international agreement in United Nations history. During those years, hundreds of

thousands of indigenous peoples were routed from their homes, massacred in their villages, had their sacred sites defiled, and their lands and resources appropriated. Even with the declaration now adopted, many of these problems will continue unless nations live up to the principals in the document. Unfortunately, the United States stands to be one of these problem states. It was one of the four countries (along with Canada, New Zealand, and Australia) that voted against the declaration. Its vote sends a message to Native Americans and to the world that once again the United States is not prepared to take action to support human rights, even when those rights benefit American citizens. The four "no" votes did not dampen the enthusiasm of Indigenous Peoples for today's outcome. As Indigenous Peoples Caucus president and Cultural Survival Program Council member Les Malezer stated in his statement following the vote, "The Declaration gives [Indigenous Peoples] the platform for addressing the continuing abuses of human rights against Indigenous Peoples and for shaping a future where it can be realized that all peoples are truly equal."

About Cultural Survival Founded in 1972, Cultural Survival promotes the rights, voices, and visions of indigenous peoples worldwide. We work to increase global understanding of indigenous peoples' rights, cultures, and concerns and we partner with indigenous groups to advocate for their rights. 215 Prospect Street Cambridge, MA 02139 phone: 617-441-5400 fax: 617-441-5417 email: culturalsurvival@cs.org web: www.culturalsurvival.org