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ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Panel Statement

**“The Sacred Sites and the Environment from an Indigenous Perspective”
Organized by Yachay Wasi (House of Learning in Quechua),
a Side Event of the Fifth Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous
Issues, United Nations Conference Room 802, DC2 8th Floor, NY, USA
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Madame Chair,
Dear Indigenous sisters and brothers,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking the organisers for inviting to say few words on “the Sacred Sites and the Environment from Indigenous Perspectives” as side event of the fifth session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

There is a rough estimate that 370 – 500 million indigenous people live in the world and represent almost 4,500-5000 diverse cultures, languages and civilisations out of about 6000 cultures and civilizations of the world. This world is colourful and full of diversity and richness, largely because of indigenous peoples. It is unfortunate that we are facing huge challenges in today’s world; political, economic and social marginalisation and discrimination, even extinction, cultural loss, inequality, deprivation, displacement, ill health, low literacy, extreme poverty and last but not least, situations of conflict .

Furthermore, in many places where our indigenous communities live, environment related issues have become more than ever serious and crucial for us such as access to fresh air, water and forests because the pollution of water resources or environmental damages by extractive industries or development activities and the global warming by Green House Gas Emissions from the industries. Because our cosmovision of life and nature are disrespected. The western civilisation promotes greed and consumerism. We indigenous peoples had warned much earlier that the western model of development which disrespects the indigenous perspective of nature and life will bring disaster in the world since it disturbs the balance between man and nature and spirits.

Our cosmic view of life means being connected with the environment and the world around us. Everything in environment and planet has life and, as such, it has a SACRED value. For us the earth, mountains, plains, caves, plants, animals, stones, water, air, the Moon, the Sun, the stars are sacred. Spirituality is born of this view and conception by which all beings that exist in and with Mother Nature possess life and are interrelated. Spirituality is linked to the sense of a COMMUNITY, where beings are interconnected and interdependent in their existence. We therefore worship water source, rivers, sea and lakes, mountains, our earth mother, not only because they are the a means for our survival, but also because they are part of ourselves and of our identity as peoples. We treat environment as our community members, and in many cases, mountains and water resources are sacred for us, they represent our ancestors, they are sources of our force, our spirituality and our soul.

I feel proud to say that indigenous peoples are making concrete contributions to the global cultural and biological diversity, the planet- our mother earth and the future of humanity. We are indigenous because we are conscious of the great responsibility and mission to this mother earth. We are bestowed with the responsibility to maintain balance within the natural world. When any part is destroyed, all balance is cast into chaos. When the last tree is gone, the last ice cap is gone, and the last river has dried up, then the people will learn that we cannot eat gold and silver. To nurture the land is our obligation to our ancestors, who passed this to us for future generations.

We are happy that the international community has started to pay attention to indigenous experiences with regard to cultural and biological diversity. Indeed, our ancestors have transmitted to us from generation to generation extremely rich knowledge and experiences for the protection of our sacred sites. Our histories and our languages are a mirror of this extraordinary richness; scientists and linguists have told the whole world that each of our indigenous community has a special and intimate relationship with the nature in which they live. I want to quote the following para. from my own Indigenous Tamang People in Nepal:

[Tamang Village (Territory) is not merely a political border but includes the distinct cosmology with certain faith, taste, and notion of beauty and means of livelihood. A notion of residence that consists of not only agglomeration of houses but also the fields of the inhabitants and the habitats of living and non-living beings around it; where the energy forces (feelings, thoughts, actions, etc) of all beings that inhabit the Earth come together.

[. territorial deities cohabit the same sites as the ancestral and protector deities of each clan lineages which the Tamangs perceive as sacred: in every house by the ‘hearth,’ in every village by a ‘grove of trees’ called the seat of the ‘Lord of the Earth’ and at the water source nearby, which is called the seat of the ‘white goddess’ and in every region the Tamang have their communal religious centers either on a ‘sacred mountain’ or by a ‘lake’ such as Gosainkund (lake), Kalinchow and Sailung (mountain) in central Nepal.] [Excerpt from “Tamang Healing in the Himalaya” by Mr. Tamang & el]

Many UN agencies have been addressing issues of traditional knowledge, cultural and biological diversity in the various areas of their competence. FAO, CBD and UNESCO are few of them. UNESCO has adopted Conventions on Cultural Diversity, World Natural Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage. UNESCO, as the watchdog of the world’s cultural and natural heritage has been working for years on the protection of natural and cultural heritage by providing technical assistance in various forms. The *Akwé: Kon guidelines* of the Convention on Biological Diversity for the conduct of impact assessment regarding developments projects implemented on, sacred sites and on lands and waters traditionally occupied or used by indigenous and local communities and the Declaration by the Tokyo Conference on “the Role of Sacred Natural Sites in Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity” organised by UNESCO together with the secretariats of CBD, FAO, IUCN and UNPFII in last June 2005 in Tokyo, Japan can be enough basis for furtherance the work in this field.

All this very important and substantive work has the same aim as indigenous peoples have, which is to protect our earth mother for our future generations. In this regard, it is very important how to ensure the participation, effective and meaningful participation of indigenous peoples in all UN agencies' work. I want to tell the world that our Indigenous peoples' holistic worldview has much to offer to the world as it has showed in the history.

Effective participation is the key for the success of any projects undertaken in indigenous communities, whether it is on literacy, development, health or on the conservation and protection of sacred sites. I go even further than participation itself. In the area of development, we believe that the principle of free, prior and informed consent should be respected when it comes to projects which would be implemented in an indigenous community or would impact on community. I think this is an extremely important principle to observe, it also falls within the concept of "the human right-based approach" which the United Nations system has been implementing through its work. It implies, "Be the part of the process and own the product." The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has reiterated this principle that the UN agencies, States and Private Sectors should respect the right of Indigenous peoples to free, prior and informed consent.

Nowadays, with technologies and sophisticated methods, sacred sites can be physically very well protected, but without community living intimately with them, communicating with them, they would be meaningless and empty. I do not think this should be the ultimate purpose of conservation. I come from Nepal, a country of the Himalaya. Himalaya certainly means a paradise for millions and millions of people, lovers of nature, thanks to its extraordinary and unique flora and fauna in the world, but it has more meanings and spiritual weight for people living around it. Himalaya would not be as it is today if we, indigenous peoples of the Himalaya, no longer worship it as sacred site and feel as part of this beautiful landscape.

As we all know that in some places in our region, natural parks have been designed in indigenous areas. With the good faith to protect these areas of significant cultural and natural values, some indigenous communities have been affected in their daily life, their access to natural resource has been limited in the name of protection, their culture has been redefined to be shown for tourist purposes and in many cases, their involvement in the managements of sites has not always been satisfactory, they do not necessarily have fair and equal access to benefit-sharing. I therefore feel very urgent that we have to tackle these issues collectively together with all the development actors and burden bearers.

The best strategy would be "the conservation of the Sacred Sites and Biological Diversity through the protection of the indigenous traditional knowledge". And being mindful of the indispensable relationship between mother languages and the

traditional knowledge, I encourage the concerned UN agencies and people to work on the development of Convention on Language Rights. If we have to reverse the trend of biodiversity loss in the world and meet the target of 2010 Global Biodiversity Conservation and the Goal No. 7 of Millennium Development Goals, I urge the global human society to put environmental agenda in the top priority of their work as a matter of urgency. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, as a subsidiary body established by the United Nations Economic and Social Council to advise the Council and the UN system and having mandate of coordination on environment relating to indigenous peoples within the UN system, should play a more important role in this endeavor.

I look forward to receiving your recommendations for the Permanent Forum from this very important meeting. In closing, I thank you all for your attention.

Thank you, madam chair.