

**U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**  
Brief Overview of Recent Developments

Background:

On July 28, 2000 the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) adopted Resolution E/2000/22, establishing "a permanent forum on indigenous issues" as a subsidiary organ of ECOSOC. According to the resolution, the Permanent Forum will consist of a total of 16 members: 8 members to be nominated by governments and elected by ECOSOC, and 8 members to be appointed by the President of ECOSOC "on the basis of broad consultations with indigenous organizations taking into account the diversity and geographical distribution of the indigenous people of the world". Organizations of indigenous people may participate in the Forum as observers, as may states, United Nations bodies and organs, and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.

Many of the exact details regarding the implementation of the Permanent Forum, however, were left undecided, for instance:

- the method of selection of the 8 Indigenous members of the Permanent Forum;
- the location of the annual sessions of the Permanent Forum (Geneva, New York, or some other location);
- the question of the secretariat of the Permanent Forum;
- and the future role / continuance of the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations.

Developments:

- The Indigenous Caucus at the Sixth Session of the Working Group on the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Geneva on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2000 agreed to by consensus that the 8 Indigenous representatives be selected from the following regions: 1. Arctic/Europe; 2. Africa; 3. Asia; 4. North America; 5. Central/South America and Caribbean; 6. Pacific; 7. Former USSR and Eastern Europe; 8. Rotating an additional seat between three regions – Asia, Africa and Central/South America and Caribbean. The Caucus also agreed that Central/South America and Caribbean be the first region to hold the 8<sup>th</sup> seat.

While the concern continues to be expressed that a division of the world in only 8 regions is not sufficient to reflect the diversity of Indigenous Peoples, taking into account their linguistic, cultural and other differences, regional consultations have been held in most of the regions (e.g. in Panama on February 16-17, 2001, in Australia on February 17, 2001, in Bolivia on March 13-15, 2001, in Ecuador on May 3-4, 2001, and in Russia on April 12-13, 2001), and in some of the regions agreement was reached on names of Indigenous candidates for membership of the Permanent Forum. It is not clear whether the Indigenous Peoples of Mexico are part of the North American region or the Central American region.

- On February 5, 2001, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Mrs. Mary Robinson held a meeting in New York with Indigenous representatives from the United States to discuss the

implementation of the Permanent Forum and to obtain Indigenous Peoples' views. Amongst the delegates invited to attend the meeting was Tony Black Feather, Spokesman, Tetuwan Oyate, Teton Sioux Nation Treaty Council. His statement to the High Commissioner is attached.

- On February 26, 2001, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Mrs. Mary Robinson circulated a letter among Indigenous Organizations stating that the U.N. Secretary-General had designated the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights as the lead agency for the implementation of the Permanent Forum. The letter also called on Indigenous Organizations to nominate Indigenous candidates for membership of the Permanent Forum by October 1, 2001.

Indigenous representatives have expressed their concern with regard to this call made by Ms. Robinson, based on the fact that the Office of the High Commissioner will receive a great quantity of nominations for Indigenous experts by Indigenous organizations on an individual basis, without prior consultation with the Indigenous Peoples, Nations and Organizations of their region.

- On May 18, 2001 a meeting took place between representatives of Indigenous Peoples, Nations and Organizations and the Senior Vice-President of ECOSOC, Ambassador Dr. Ivan Šimonović of Croatia who is the person within ECOSOC responsible for issues related to the Permanent Forum. The Indigenous delegates informed the Vice-President of the consensus reached in Geneva regarding the regional division; they invited ECOSOC to consider that more regions than eight were needed to give all the Indigenous Peoples in the world a distinct voice within the Forum; they urged Ambassador Šimonović to take measures for the early establishment of a separate secretariat of the Permanent Forum; they asked that a coordinating mechanism be created to facilitate communication between ECOSOC and Indigenous Peoples; and they expressed the concern that the deadline for submitting nominations of Indigenous experts to the Permanent Forum was too soon and that in some of the regions more time would be needed to ensure a fair process of selection.

Ambassador Šimonović said that if Indigenous Peoples needed more time to select their representatives, ECOSOC would be willing to provide that time. He said that the ECOSOC secretariat, with Ms. Margaret Kelley being the person in charge, would serve as the focal point for Indigenous Peoples within ECOSOC. It was agreed that another meeting between Indigenous Peoples' representatives and Ambassador Šimonović / ECOSOC to further discuss the Permanent Forum would be arranged in July in Geneva during the session of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations. The Tetuwan Oyate, Teton Sioux Nation Treaty Council, will be in Geneva for this meeting. (The WGIP meets from July 23 to July 27 - it is possible that the meeting with ECOSOC will take place on the weekend before the WGIP).

- At an organizational session of ECOSOC on June 4, 2001 the representative of the United States stated that the United States believed the WGIP had fulfilled its mandate, and that it was the understanding of the United States that the WGIP would focus its next session on how best to hand its work to the Permanent Forum.
- At an informal meeting of ECOSOC in June a draft resolution was presented which proposes that the first official meeting of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues be held 6-17 May 2002 either in New York or in Geneva. The draft resolution also states that the election of the Indigenous and government experts to the Permanent Forum will take place on 15 December 2001. It does not address the Indigenous Peoples' recommendation to have a separate Secretariat for the Permanent Forum. The draft resolution will be considered for adoption at the substantive session of ECOSOC, July 2 - July 27, 2001.