



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES INDIGENOUS VOICES

Backgrounder

Indigenous Peoples of North America

Ninth Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Thursday 22 April, 2010, 3-6 pm
Conference Room 1, United Nations, New York

Issues related to indigenous peoples in North America will be the focus of a half-day discussion on 22 April as part of the Ninth Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), to be held at UN Headquarters in New York from 19 to 30 April. The discussion will focus on identifying the issues, challenges and positive measures of cooperation to improve the situation of indigenous peoples in the region.

The Permanent Forum is expected to adopt a statement and recommendations at the conclusion of the discussion. Members of the UNPFII, Member States, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, indigenous peoples' organizations, non-governmental organizations and media are invited to participate.

Indigenous peoples in North America: challenges and issues

Indigenous peoples of North America are found in all states within the United States of America (USA) and all Provinces and Territories of Canada. Despite living in developed, first-world countries, indigenous peoples of North America suffer many social problems, including: lack of employment; access to clean water; physical and social isolation; substandard housing; attacks on their cultural identity; and high rates of crime and incarceration. For example, the arrest rate is nearly double and the rate of incarceration nearly four times higher among indigenous peoples than the national average. All these factors play into indigenous peoples' social dislocation and alienation from both their ancestral lands, and North American society in general.

Education

Aggressive assimilation tactics of the past, such as residential schools and adoption programs, have impacted on indigenous peoples' cultures, languages, and traditions in North America. Boarding schools still operate today in the United States. Some are operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, some are administered by churches and some are under tribal control. Attendance is no longer mandatory, and native children are not forced to practice Christianity. Many schools that are under tribal control teach native languages and emphasize native cultural traditions.



United Nations



In 2006, the Government of Canada announced the Indian Residential Schools Settlement. This agreement was made between the Government of Canada, the Assembly of First Nations and legal representatives of both former residential school students and the churches involved in the schools. This settlement included a lump-sum payment for all survivors, which is a new process for dealing with serious claims of abuse. Canada has also established a five-year truth and reconciliation commission on abuse in residential schools. In June 2008, the Prime Minister of Canada apologized in the House of Commons for the physical, sexual and other abuses that had taken place in Indian Residential Schools.

Land rights

North America's indigenous peoples tend to have some form of independence and right to self-government. However, there is still uncertainty as to how to negotiate the many outstanding land claims. Treaty rights and the right to self-government are often seen as the principal solutions to most of the issues faced by indigenous peoples.

Violence against women

In Canada, approximately 500 Aboriginal women have been murdered or reported missing over the past 15 years. Indigenous women in North America are five times more likely to experience violent death than non-indigenous women. Indigenous women are also overrepresented in the prison system. Intra-family abuse and violence continue to be serious problems in North America despite some efforts to address this situation through community healing centres. Shelters and suitable housing as well as adequate and affordable child care are important for ensuring the safety of women. Child welfare is one of the services that indigenous peoples want to control themselves.

Health

In Canada, First Nations' infant mortality rates have seen improvements over the years, but the bigger picture remains bleak. Incidences of mental illness, alcoholism and fetal alcohol syndrome, suicide, injuries, diabetes, tuberculosis, HIV infection, obesity and hypertension are often several times higher than those in the non-aboriginal population. The National Institutes of Health and several other minority health care institutions struggle with HIV/ AIDS, (exceptional forms of) cancer, diabetes, heart diseases and mental health questions. A leading cause of death among indigenous children and youth is suicide, a severe social problem that requires long-term integrated policies at all levels.

Environment

Environmental concerns are widespread among indigenous peoples in North America. The exploitation and industrialization of the land and water have altered the relationships that have sustained indigenous peoples and their communities. These changes have accelerated in recent years with health issues related to toxic chemicals and pollution, as well as increased hardships in hunting and fishing where changes in migratory patterns, diseased fish, climate change and extinction of species are occurring.

For more information on the UN Permanent Forum in Indigenous Issues, please visit:
www.un.org/indigenous

