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INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND DEVELOPED NATIONS

*By Pauline E. Tangiora**

*Nga mihi tuatahi nana nga mea katoa
Nga tatau mate Haere Haere Haere
Nga Tangata Whenua Mohawk O Great Turtle Island tena koe
Tena koe te tangata nga Hou e Wha*

To our Indigenous compatriots, we thank you for your welcome. We remember the ancestors, including those recently departed, of not only Indigenous Peoples but of all here present.

Thank you to the Coordinating Committee who found the energy to ensure our presence here today on this land of Great Turtle Island.

For the benefit of those present, one needs to make it very clear that in coming here as a Maori one cannot claim to speak for all Maori or all Indigenous Peoples around the world, but one can bring a perspective of concern on Indigenous issues.

Whilst the panel before you this morning is “Decade of Indigenous Peoples”, my concern is that to proceed on this topic without a holistic overview would be to condemn our Peoples to a non-identity.

Sitting here over the past two days gives me much concern with respect to the status of Indigenous Peoples in the modern day world, and its place within the parameters of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (“*Universal Declaration*”).

Do not misunderstand me. The *Universal Declaration* was, in no uncertain terms, drawn up and given the United Nations stamp in good faith. However, it is a eurocentric document for what was the up-and-coming nuclear age. Indeed, within the decade following the *Universal Declaration*, the first nuclear weapons were tested on lands of Indigenous Peoples in Mexico, and they have continued to be tested on lands of Indigenous Peoples.

You may ask what that has to do with the Decade of Indigenous Peoples (“Decade”).

We are halfway through the Decade and their lands remain poisoned with tailings from uranium mining and testing. Nevada, Mururoa, Northern Australia

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and the Marshall Islands carry the scars, some which will never heal. In fact, through genetic mutilation genocide has, and will continue to, kill generations.

It took a long time for the International Court of Justice to accept to hear the case for the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. We all know the outcome!

For Tahitians, the gift of the *Decade* is confirmation by a privately funded study that the high mortality rate at a young age is inevitable. The damage to the seabed and lands of Indigenous Peoples may never recover from the scourge of mining and testing.

When Rigoberta Menchu Tum received the Nobel Peace Prize and became Ambassador for the Year of Indigenous Peoples, the year before the commencement of the Decade, it was hoped that the many declarations and the addressing of past treaties signed by European Society, for example the English, French, Portuguese and Spanish, would go a long way to mending relationships. Sadly, this is not so. In my country of Aotearoa, the right-wing government is trying to settle illegal land claims at a pittance of the value they are worth. Some tribes have chosen to accept this, though not in a context of unity within their tribes. We now see emerging non-traditional values of tribal corporations and the dispossession of the resources of smaller tribes. Such is the divide-and-rule mentality of modern day corporate structuralisation, which is subtle and not a part of traditional structures. Time has been the element pressuring us to move now.

So many wonderful things were envisaged for the Decade, but many of us saw the writing on the wall from an early point. When the world's Indigenous Peoples gathered at the United Nations in New York for the opening ceremony of the Decade, very few delegates of the 170 or more countries remained in their seats to share in the opening agenda of speeches and songs. The Decade began with a ceremony in front of empty seats!

In so-called developed countries such as Aotearoa, the United States, Canada and Australia, where a fair number of Indigenous Peoples reside, little resources have been set aside to maintain the Decade. In fact, a few posters here and there has been the norm. Governments' donations to the Indigenous Peoples' voluntary fund has been almost negligible.

Voluntary organisations and countries such as Sweden, Denmark and even Canada have been forthcoming with funds to assist Indigenous Peoples in countries with a low GNP. In many cases they tried not to use the funds in a way so as to embarrass the Government of the day.

One cannot walk you through all the pains of Indigenous Peoples in a short amount of time. However, you all need to look within your soul to feel the pain and deprivation of Indigenous Peoples, of their land. To deprive a people of their Nation is to have a soul with no heartbeat.

In 1988, the United Nations entrusted Miguel Alfonso Martinez as special rapporteur, in order to complete a study on treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements between States and Indigenous Populations.

For governments of the world it is now D-Day. The result is that they need to dialogue with Indigenous Peoples; they are not, and never have been, ethnic minorities within their land. On the contrary, the UN study shows, even though Indigenous Peoples have known this all along, that these treaties between Indigenous Peoples and States compels a distinction between Indigenous People and ethnic minorities.

Sitting here this week, it gives me concern when I hear speakers of this country talk about Aboriginal People. Are you afraid to say First Nations Peoples? Changing a paradigm is to proceed on the way to a healing process. It is the hope that the Decade will bring an acceptance by colonial governing powers of Indigenous systems and procedures. These are not "customs", as defined in the *Universal Declaration* and other governmental definitions. Being Indigenous is a way of life intrinsically entwined with Mother Earth. We are of the earth and the earth is us; without Her we are nothing. We are not part of a multicultural dimension, but participate in its actions through contact with others.

Eurocentric settling of boundaries has been one of the most destructive methods of trying to break down Indigenous Peoples' class and tribal memberships. How often have you seen Governments, whether local, regional or national, draw boundaries through tribal areas? How often have we seen known tribes being displaced? For example, in Chile the Mapuche have had their boundaries tampered with, while in Guatemala the Mayan run into Chiapas, Mexico and here in Turtle Island (Canada) boundaries for health are in two administrative areas. One could go on.

The taking of land for mining and cutting forests has deprived Indigenous Peoples of their way of life by poisoning their waterways, and destroyed them by rendering them landless. A People dispossessed of their land are nothing. Even in this country, I have heard that Native women have had their land titles legislated away and can only be held by males!

Whereas the International Labour Organization ("ILO") intended to help us by adopting the *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989* ("ILO Convention No. 169"), the *Convention* does not include a statement that Indigenous Peoples have an inalienable right to self-determination. The *Convention* is being acclaimed as the answer to all Indigenous Peoples' problems; what dreams!

The commiseration ceremonies around the world of 500 years of European domination, but not conquest, was seen as a starting point to building bridges and of coming together as equals in respect and co-operation. Alas, this has not happened.

Whereas the *Universal Declaration* was drawn up for individual rights, standing here today one can say that my rights can never be as an individual, but must always be as part of the collective. This is why it was important to have the Mohawk people here, to have me walk their land with dignity and humility. Our Elders understood our rights, but more especially our responsibilities. Our spiritual connectedness makes us answerable to each other whenever we transgress, as we each need each other to be humble and accept our responsibilities as caretakers and guardians. We are but like the fresh breath of the wind, it will come with a song and drive one down like a hurricane.

May we all learn to reach out together to share the creator's creation, respect each others' role, for indeed we all have a role, and work alongside each other for the protection of Mother Earth.

Kia Ora Tatou.