

Observer Delegation
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United States of America

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STATEMENT TO THE WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

Geneva, July 26, 1994

As many of you know, the Clinton Administration is deeply committed to the promotion and protection of human rights, both at home and abroad. Unfortunately, indigenous people have too often been subject to serious abuse and often lack the means to ensure that their governments recognize their human rights, including their right to dignity and full equality.

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The members of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations should be congratulated for the substantial time and effort that they have put into preparing a document that is worthy of the proud heritage of indigenous people throughout the world. The chairperson of the group, Mrs. Erica-Irene Daes, deserves special praise for her organizational role and her substantive contributions to the promotion of the human rights and cultural heritage of indigenous people.

My government strongly supports the basic goals of the draft declaration. We are determined to build a relationship with indigenous people in the United States based on recognition and respect for their cultural identity, and acting in partnership and consultation with tribal governments.

We are determined to work with other governments to ensure a strong and useful declaration that recognizes the rights of indigenous people, and that promotes dialogue, negotiation and cooperation between governments and indigenous people.

At the same time, certain provisions of the draft declaration appear to be potentially problematic. We believe these issues should be discussed and can be resolved. None of them appears insurmountable. None of them should hinder the adoption of a strong declaration on the rights of indigenous people.

The United States can offer a working model of how these rights can be recognized and implemented. Since the 1970's, the U.S. Government has supported the concept of self-determination for Indian tribes and Alaska Natives within the United States. In our domestic context "self-determination" means recognizing

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tribal self-governance and autonomy over a broad range of issues. This is a positive development, which reinforces the status of indigenous people within an existing state. The uniqueness and importance of our policy of self-governance was highlighted by President Clinton when he spoke to tribal leaders at the White House on April 29. In his words:

"In every relationship between our people, our first principle must be to respect your right to remain who you are and to live the way you wish to live. And I believe the best way to do that is to acknowledge the unique government-to-government relationship we have enjoyed over time. Today I reaffirm our commitment to self-determination for tribal governments. I pledge to fulfill the trust obligations of the Federal Government.

I vow to honor and respect tribal sovereignty based upon our unique historical relationship. And I pledge to continue my efforts to protect your right to fully exercise your faith as you wish."

These are powerful words and we want to explore how this concept of self-determination might be translated into international terms. This means moving the draft declaration farther along towards eventual adoption by the UN General Assembly. Accordingly, we urge that the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities review the draft and refer it to the 1995 session of the Commission on Human Rights. In this manner, perhaps it may prove possible to adopt the declaration during the early years of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People.

We are committed to working with other governments, members of the Working Group, indigenous representatives, non-governmental organizations, and other interested parties, to achieve a solid document that advances the cause of indigenous people's rights everywhere. The sooner that we can begin the better. While our history has not always been a proud one, our future can be.

Thank you, Madame Chairperson.