

Statement of the  
American Friends  
Service Committee  
Regarding the

# Rights of Indigenous Peoples of the World

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## *Decade of Indigenous Peoples*

January 1995 marked the beginning of the United Nations (UN) Decade of Indigenous Peoples. This act exemplifies the increased attention being given to indigenous peoples, their rights, and their concerns within our global community. However, this attention has not come easily. Many of the more than 300 million indigenous peoples in the world face social and economic disadvantages in the countries in which they live. Some of the world's worst violations of human rights have been and continue to be committed against indigenous peoples. They have struggled to retain their languages, civic structures, lands, and spiritual life. And, despite the tenacity of those struggles, many indigenous cultures have failed to survive. As Boutros Boutros-Ghali, former secretary general of the UN has noted, "For centuries indigenous people have lived on the margins of national and international life."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ewen, Alexander, ed., *Voices of Indigenous Peoples: Native People Address the United Nations*, (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Clear Light Publishers, 1994) p. 9.

**I**t is heartening that the voices of indigenous peoples are beginning to be heard in international forums. The Decade of Indigenous Peoples has grown out of years of efforts of these peoples to have their rights and aspirations recognized as a legitimate concern of all who value human rights. The cornerstone of the Decade will be the UN's adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Draft Declaration is an historic statement developed over a twelve-year period by the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities special Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP). The WGIP was created in 1982 with the mandate to review conditions of human rights of indigenous peoples and to establish standards for such rights. Indigenous peoples from North and South America, the Pacific Islands, Australia, New Zealand, Asia, Africa, and Europe participated in the annual WGIP meetings in Geneva, Switzerland, to draft the current Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration was approved by the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities and, in 1995, it was referred to the Human Rights Commission of the UN. A working group of the Human Rights Commission is currently considering the Draft Declaration. After it is approved by the entire Human Rights Commission, it will be submitted to the Economic and Social Council and, finally, to the General Assembly for adoption.

The fifteen-year history of this effort to bring international attention to the human rights of indigenous peoples has witnessed strong and ever increasing unity among indigenous nations, organizations, and individuals. Their voices are clear—they understand that the nature of their human rights lies in the very essence of their identity as *peoples*. They properly claim that their rights as peoples are collectively realized through their cultural and civic community. Boutros Boutros-Ghali challenged the global community to understand this when he noted that: "...the situation of indigenous peoples prompts us to take a broader look at human rights

today. Henceforth we realize that human rights cover not only individual rights but also collective rights, historical rights. We are discovering the 'new human rights,' which include first and foremost cultural rights."<sup>2</sup>

Even as indigenous peoples are strongly asserting their rights in international forums, and their collective rights as peoples are acknowledged by a former secretary general of the UN, their voices are not yet powerful enough to overcome the centuries of colonial and imperialist practices that have subordinated and impoverished them and, in the worst of cases, even eliminated them from the global family. For this reason, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), with its long history of supporting human rights, is adopting this statement regarding the rights of indigenous peoples.

**I**n making this statement, AFSC draws from its own experience and engagements with indigenous peoples in North and South America and the South Pacific Islands. In its work, AFSC has striven to understand the aspirations of indigenous peoples and to support them in their struggles to survive and prosper as distinct and unique cultures in the human family. In making this statement, the AFSC is also mindful of its roots within the history and experience of the Religious Society of Friends in the United States. Early Quaker relationships with indigenous peoples in the United States were well intentioned and were noteworthy for their respect for the dignity of native peoples. However, the Quaker record is not without its failures to understand and embrace the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples. Quaker practices were often blind to the effects of colonialism and assimilation on the rights of indigenous peoples. It is from the experience of AFSC and Quaker history that we have come to understand the importance of speaking to the rights of indigenous peoples.

<sup>2</sup> Ewen, p. 13.

## Statement Supporting the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

During this Decade of Indigenous Peoples, the American Friends Service Committee is challenged to speak from our own experience to the important issues before the UN and to examine our opportunities to continue and deepen our work in support of indigenous rights. Drawing from Quaker beliefs and our organizational work with indigenous peoples in the United States and in other nations, the AFSC Board of Directors adopts the following policy statement to guide our work and to inform others of our concerns and convictions.

*The American Friends Service Committee believes that human rights of indigenous peoples are held in the collective of the community.* We believe, as the UN Charter proclaims, that "...all peoples have an inalienable right to complete freedom, the exercise of their sovereignty and the integrity of their national territory." Affirmation of the collective right of indigenous peoples as *peoples* is a recognition of their equality with other *peoples* of the world. AFSC accepts the *collective nature inherent in the very essence and identity of indigenous peoples*, and recognizes that human rights include collective rights and individual rights.

**W**e have heard the expressed concern of some UN member nation-states that the recognition of the collective rights of indigenous peoples and their right to self-determination as *peoples* could challenge the territorial and political integrity of existing nation-states. This concern is based on fear that indigenous peoples could secede from nation-states in which they now live. While respecting the concerns of nation-states, AFSC rejects fear of possible outcomes as an adequate reason to deny basic human rights. Nor have we heard in statements of indigenous peoples to the UN Human Rights Commission Working Group that secession is a primary goal of their quest for equality.

*The American Friends Service Committee strongly supports the*

*right to self-determination as expressed in the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.* As affirmed in Articles 3 and 4 of the Draft Declaration, inherent in the rights of indigenous peoples is the right to self-determination. Indigenous peoples have the right to determine freely their political status and their economic and cultural development. They have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, economic, social, and cultural characteristics, as well as their legal systems, while retaining their rights to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the nation-states in which they reside.

**T**he opposition to self-determination of indigenous peoples often is based on the reluctance to accept difference. However, as the AFSC learned in our study of the fishing rights in the state of Washington, "*diversity, both in outlook and ways of operating, is a source of strength.*" The very diversity of indigenous peoples challenges us to seek deeper understandings. The challenge is to address the rights of indigenous peoples in the spirit of the American Quaker, John Woolman: to explore mutually and to learn freshly in the pursuit of a larger truth. It is only through international recognition of indigenous peoples' inherent right to collective self-determination that nation-states and indigenous peoples will be challenged to work together in new and creative ways to support and sustain each other. It is precisely this challenge that inspires hope for fairer and more equitable treatment of indigenous peoples.

*The American Friends Service Committee supports the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as it was submitted from the special Working Group on Indigenous Populations.* The Draft Declaration developed by the Working Group on Indigenous Populations and adopted by the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities represents years of research, deliberation, and discussion. It is a significant, comprehensive statement worthy of serious consideration and

approval by the UN Commission on Human Rights, the Economic and Social Council, and the General Assembly.\*

*The American Friends Service Committee also supports the full inclusion of indigenous peoples in all deliberations and sessions concerning the approval of the Draft Declaration.* We view as essential the process of inclusion that allowed indigenous delegations to participate in the working group sessions that produced the Draft Declaration. Indigenous voices are critical to this debate; their experience, wisdom, and aspirations need to be heard. We support the efforts of the Commission on Human Rights to continue to include indigenous delegations. We strongly urge all bodies at the UN to include representation of indigenous peoples in all deliberations of the Draft Declaration.

*The American Friends Service Committee will continue to seek opportunities to contribute resources and experience to enable indigenous peoples' voices to be heard in international forums. We will continue to support domestic and international program work that furthers the recognition of the inherent collective rights of native peoples in the United States and of indigenous peoples throughout the world.* When appropriate to further this work, we will support efforts for program staff and their constituents to participate in international meetings and UN forums to ensure that voices of indigenous peoples are included in deliberations regarding the protection of their rights and resources.

*The American Friends Service Committee will speak publicly in support of the rights of indigenous peoples.* We believe that our support for the Draft Declaration and for the collective human rights of indigenous peoples needs to be heard in the UN. We also believe that the governments of the United States and other nation-states should know of our convictions.



We have many resources within the AFSC and other Friends institutions to speak to the rights of indigenous peoples and to respond to the opportunities presented by the special UN Decade of

Indigenous Peoples. These resources include the AFSC programs at Davis House in Washington, D.C., the Quaker United Nations Offices in New York and Geneva, as well as opportunities provided in special meetings and conferences. We are committed to using the resources of the entire organization whenever possible to speak to the importance of the international debate on the rights of indigenous peoples and to educate constituencies regarding indigenous issues.

*The American Friends Service Committee will share our leadings on this issue with Friends around the world to encourage work to support indigenous rights.* The AFSC encourages other Quaker service committees to support these issues in their work within their own nation-states and in international arenas. AFSC will seek ways to join and learn from those efforts that have already been initiated by Friends throughout the world. We encourage kindred organizations to explore ways to become engaged in the struggles of indigenous peoples in pursuit of their rightful place within the family of nations.

*Approved by the AFSC Board on February 22, 1997*

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\*Through its work, AFSC is aware that some indigenous peoples are interested in pursuing a formal decolonization process as outlined by the UN Commission on Decolonization. Support for the Draft Declaration does not preclude supporting the interests of those who are advocating for application of the decolonization process to their specific situations.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) has been engaged with American Indians for the past 50 years as well as with indigenous communities in Latin America and the Pacific Basin. This work affirms and strongly supports the right of indigenous communities to maintain their distinctive cultures and traditions. AFSC also works to defend native treaty rights and sovereignty. We are partners with indigenous communities in their struggles for the protection of their rights within the framework of democratic and environmentally sustainable societies.

*The American Friends Service Committee is a Quaker organization that includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace, and humanitarian service. Its work is based on the Quaker belief in the worth of every person, and faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice.*



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September 19, 1997

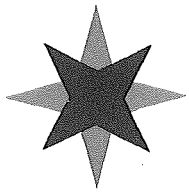
TO: AFSC Board

FROM: Ed Nakawatase

SUBJECT: **AFSC and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of the World**

Enclosed in the Board packet is the final version of the **Statement of AFSC Regarding the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of the World**, which was adopted by the Board at its February, 1997, meeting. This edition is in the process of being disseminated broadly to indigenous organizations, media, Friends groups and other supportive institutions and individuals. A Spanish translation of the document has also been prepared for future use.

The Statement will help guide AFSC as it works in increasing understanding and support for indigenous rights in the United States, Latin America, the Pacific Basin and other parts of the world. If you desire additional copies, contact Ed Nakawatase at the National Office.



# American Friends Service Committee

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DONALD S. GANN  
Chairperson

KARA L. NEWELL  
Executive Director

August, 1997

Good Morning,

The enclosed document, **Statement of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Regarding the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of the World**, is a clear and unequivocal expression of support for the rights of indigenous peoples. It reflects our program experience with Indian communities in the Americas and with indigenous peoples of the Pacific. AFSC affirms that :

- the human rights of indigenous peoples are collective as well as individual
- indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination including the right to freely determine their political status and economic and cultural development
- AFSC supports the United Nations (UN) Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as originally submitted by the special Working Group on Indigenous Populations
- we support the full inclusion of indigenous peoples in all deliberations concerning the approval of the UN Draft Declaration and will seek ways to amplify indigenous perspectives
- we will speak publicly in support of the rights of indigenous peoples

In addition to the enclosed statement, we offer you several additional resources:

- Interviews with those persons instrumental in developing the document including myself are available by calling the AFSC Communications Department at (215) 241-7056 or me directly at (215) 241-7131:

**Gerald One Feather** is project director for AFSC's Lakota Oyate Oaye program in Oglala, South Dakota and an advisor for AFSC's indigenous rights statement.

**Joan LaFrance**, a consultant for the city of Seattle, is the associate clerk of AFSC's National Community Relations Committee, and a primary person drafting the statement.

- Links to additional documents – including the working draft of the UN declaration and a summary of Quaker history and AFSC experience with indigenous peoples – are available on AFSC's web page at <http://www.afsc.org/stindrte.htm>.

In adopting this statement on indigenous rights, we acknowledge that indigenous peoples have taught us much. We want to increase our opportunities to promote justice in partnership with them. The struggle for the rights of indigenous people and our vision of a culturally diverse, peaceful, and just society guide our work. Please call if you'd like to talk to us about these documents.

Sincerely,

Ed Nakawatase

Coordinator, Native American/Native Peoples Program  
American Friends Service Committee