



**UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
FIFTY-SEVENTH SESSION
THIRD COMMITTEE**

**ITEM 116: PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES OF THE
INTERNATIONAL DECADE
OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE**

**STATEMENT BY: AMBASSADOR STUART LESLIE
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TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

**ON BEHALF OF THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY
(CARICOM)**

MONDAY 21 OCTOBER 2002

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**PERMANENT MISSION OF BELIZE
TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

Mr. Chairman,

I have the honour to speak on Agenda item#106 on behalf of the fourteen Member States of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) that are members of the United Nations: **Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, the Commonwealth of Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and my own country Belize.**

As others before me, I wish to congratulate you and other members of the bureau on your election. We are confident that your able guidance will adequately facilitate our deliberations.

CARICOM thanks the Secretary General for the report contained in document A/56/395 addressing the establishment of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the submission of the first report of the newly appointed Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people.

We are equally grateful to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for its current role in promoting inter-agency cooperation. Working within the framework of the World's Indigenous People, the Office of the High Commissioner, collaborating with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the International Labour Organization has successfully promoted initiatives and workshops important to the growth and development of our indigenous peoples. We welcome those ongoing programmes in establishment of an indigenous media network, the third workshop on Multiculturalism in Africa, indigenous-led human rights training, indigenous aspects of technical cooperation programmes in Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala and Mexico and the Indigenous Fellowship Programme.

We also thank those who supported the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations and encourage support for General Assembly resolution 56/140 of 19 December 2001 which further expanded the mandate of the Fund by deciding that the Fund should also be used to assist indigenous representatives to attend, as observers, the sessions of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

While the quality of life of our indigenous peoples have improved, we must remain vigilant and expend additional energies to counter the new challenges and difficulties. CARICOM will continue to pay keen attention to the work being undertaken by the working group of the Commission on Human Rights with the objective of arriving at a draft declaration on the rights of indigenous people that include the right to development and the right to participate in development, including equality, nondiscrimination and the recognition of the values and diversity of everyone's distinct identities, cultures and social organization.

Mr. Chairman,

The efforts to establish the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, was realized with its historic inaugural session held at United Nations Headquarters from 13 to 24 May 2002. Approximately 900 persons attended the Permanent Forum, the majority representing indigenous organizations. CARICOM welcomes the establishment of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and its role as an advisory body within the Economic and Social Council. The Permanent Forum will provide critical advice to ECOSOC in relation to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. We welcome the Forum's participation in the work of the UN and note with satisfaction its historic role as an equal participant in deliberations. We hope that the important work of the Forum will be realized and lead to greater participation with improved benefits for indigenous people. We would also like to lend our support to the adopted resolution E/2002/L.16 which calls for the establishment of a support secretariat for the new Forum, within existing resources. Such a secretariat could greatly benefit from the expertise of a Special Adviser, someone with long standing experience and knowledge of indigenous issues, capable of providing independent advice and assistance to the Forum with regard to successfully carrying out its mandate.

The Secretary General in his 1996 review expressed the need for greater participation of indigenous people in our work at the United Nations. We hope that through this Forum the issues of our Indigenous peoples will receive the attention needed.

The nineteenth session of the Working Group on Indigenous Population of the Sub-commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights held last year brought together UN Agencies, Governments and Academic Institutions to review developments, including land issues, education and health and standard setting activities. It also included a review of indigenous peoples' relationship with natural resources, energy and mining companies. It is important to note that these issues are closely linked to the outcomes of World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Tolerance; and the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People.

Mr. Chairman

Education is also a critical component for the future promotion and protection of the human rights of indigenous populations. CARICOM commends the Office of the High Commissioner for its efforts in the Indigenous Fellowship Programme. This programme, which also sees the involvement of many of the other UN Agencies and several non-governmental organizations, gives indigenous individuals the opportunity to gain experience in human rights and the United Nations system and to serve as resource persons in their communities. We are convinced that programmes like this will greatly enhance the knowledge of indigenous communities in human rights issues as they affect their right to development. We in the Caribbean are aware of the importance of strengthening the human and institutional capacities of the indigenous people to actively participate in the decision making process, and therefore attach great importance to the success of this programme.

Mr. Chairman,

CARICOM sees itself playing an important role in the development of the world's *indigenous peoples*. We are aware that they are our first inhabitants: their traditions and understanding of the harmony between our lives and the environment have taught us how to better appreciate the gifts of nature. This is a small part of the contributions they have made and continues to make towards sustainable development. We therefore realize the importance of strengthening the human and institutional capacities of indigenous people to allow them to better participate in the decision making process. We remain committed to ensuring that our countries protect and improve the quality of life of our indigenous peoples, especially the children who in many societies are among those with less access to education, proper health care and a better environment in which to grow up. Our indigenous populations are among the most vulnerable and we must ensure that they too benefit from any advancement in our national development.

On 12 October 2000 the Government of Belize signed a historic agreement with the community leaders representing the Maya of Southern Belize. This agreement recognizes the right of the Maya to the resources of the area and is based on their longstanding use and enjoyment. The agreement resulted in a partnership between the government and the Maya Communities to co-manage the natural resources of protected areas. Currently, the Government in consultation with the leaders of the Maya Community is implementing its National Poverty Elimination Strategy and Action Plan and as a result has built schools, provide access to technology and assisted with programmes to protect and preserve the environment and bringing development to our indigenous communities while respecting and preserving their cultural values. The Government of Belize is also consulting with the Maya and other indigenous communities in the southern part of the country, to assist in the implementation of a Regional Development Plan for the South of Belize, and we welcome the Inter-American Development Bank's interest in assisting with the implementation of the development programmes outlined in the plan.

Although we are committed to the development of our indigenous communities, in many instances our efforts are hindered by natural disasters, which in a matter of hours can destroy years of development efforts. One year ago Hurricane Iris, a category four hurricane, devastated the southern part of our country destroying thousands of homes and leaving thousands of people homeless within our indigenous communities. This is a reality all of us in CARICOM must live with.

In some member states the traditional lifestyle of our indigenous populations includes living in small tribes scattered over large remote areas. This results in heavy migration patterns and is a challenge for our Governments to fulfill the necessary obligations to their indigenous people.

In the context of Guyana, incremental progress is being made with regard to the economic and social development of indigenous people. Through the collaborative efforts of the Government of Guyana, UNDP and UNICEF, intensified focus has been placed on poverty alleviation particularly with regard to the improvement of health care, education and food and nutrition programmes. Broadbased consultations with members of the indigenous communities have underpinned the design of both the Amazon Programme as well as the GOG/UNDP poverty alleviation strategy. Currently, the Scholarship Programme for Hinterland Students and the Amerindian Act, one of the instruments which guarantees the enjoyment of full rights of indigenous people in Guyana are being reviewed.

Mr. Chairman,

There is so much to be proud of our past, in our history; the great Maya Civilization is still much alive in Belize. It is not dead stones and ruins, but rather temples that should inspire us, a civilization from which we can learn so many things.

It is all too easy to be politically correct on this issue and to say the right sorts of things on behalf of those who were here before. But none of these words will improve the lives of our indigenous groups, unless we translate them into action.

Mr. Chairman,

CARICOM's commitment to the development and integration of indigenous peoples into our development agenda is unquestionable, we have instituted policies and included their participation in the decision making process to ensure that their customs are taken into consideration in the sustainable development of our natural resources. We are aware of the tremendous contributions and sacrifices they have made towards our national development, and remain committed to ensuring that our countries protect and improve the quality of life of our indigenous peoples.

Thank you.