

IWGIA's statement

UN General Assembly fails to bring hope to world's indigenous peoples

More than two decades of efforts to promote international human rights standards for the safety and well-being of Indigenous Peoples appear to have failed following the adoption of a motion by the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly on 28th November 2006 to defer the historic adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The motion, promoted by few Western countries and put forward by the Namibian delegation on behalf of the African Group of States, was put to the vote with a majority of 82 nation states in favour, 67 against and 25 abstentions.

As a non-governmental organization devoted to promoting the rights of indigenous peoples worldwide and which has, from the very beginning, been directly involved in the discussions regarding the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, IWGIA wishes to make known its immeasurable dismay and concern at the decision taken yesterday by the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly. We fear this may mean that the United Nations will never adopt a strong international human rights standard that promotes and respects the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples.

We also believe that the General Assembly's failure in this regard is a serious setback for the integrity of the newly-established Human Rights Council. The Council, mandated by the General Assembly itself to promote universal respect for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, had urged the General Assembly to formally adopt the Declaration without delay.

By not adopting the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the UN General Assembly has undoubtedly not only deafeningly failed to enhance the capacity of the international human rights system to address some of the most pervasive and reprehensible human rights violations in the world today but has also missed an historic opportunity to advance the rights and aspirations of the world's indigenous peoples. The ambiguity of the resolution adopted by the Third Committee makes it very difficult to predict the future that lies ahead for the Declaration. The current text is the result of more than 22 years of arduous dialogue between indigenous peoples and governments and is now widely accepted among those who have been involved in this process. We therefore believe that yet more months of undefined government consultations will in no way improve its chances of being adopted but can rather be seen as an attempt by governments such as Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada - who have stubbornly opposed the Declaration's text as adopted by the Human Rights Council - to butcher it or to block its final adoption all together. We are sure that the current disappointment and dismay that indigenous peoples, human rights NGOs and international institutions are feeling today is also shared by those governments who are strongly committed to advocating for adoption of the Declaration.

Given that it is difficult to envisage, at this moment in time, what the full significance and implications of the passing of Namibia's resolution will be, it is essential that all those governments who have been thus far committed to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples redouble their efforts and work, together with indigenous peoples, to promote the General Assembly's adoption of the text approved by the Human Rights Council in June 2006.

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