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NNHRC appreciates U.N. Secretary-General's initiative to further empower indigenous peoples

SAINT MICHAELS, Navajo Nation—Navajo human rights officials laud the U.N. Secretary-General's call for mainstream media and indigenous media to play a role in empowering indigenous people yesterday.

Yesterday, the U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon provided his remarks in New York. According to his statement, after formal greetings and explaining earlier this year he met with representatives of the People's Summit who had expressed their concerns—"about the green economy, about land ownership, and about Governments and big business treating natural common assets as commodities, losing all sight of their deeper significance."

Said Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, "I listened carefully and I emphasized that sustainable development is about people—all people. There can be no development for indigenous peoples without their free, prior and informed consent and without them being involved in every step." He said, "These fundamental principles are enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples."

On July 26, 2012, the United Nations issued a press release for the media to recognize the International Day of World's Indigenous Peoples, which was yesterday, the theme being "Indigenous Media, Empowering Indigenous Voice." The U.N. body of members, the General Assembly, proclaimed the Day in December 1994. Nearly thirteen years later, the U.N. General Assembly adopted the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Like any declaration, it announced and avowed to the world—unique language. And, in this case, the Declaration asserts the rights of indigenous peoples.

"From newspapers to the internet and social media, indigenous peoples are challenging mainstream narratives, bringing human rights violations to international attention and forging global solidarity. By developing their own media, indigenous peoples are able to reflect their own values and fight myths and misconceptions," said Mr. Ban Ki-Moon.

He said, "Compelling stories tell of continuing struggles to overcome centuries of injustice and discrimination, of peoples standing firm for the resources and rights that will preserve cultures, languages, spirituality and traditions. These stories are in themselves a valuable resource for us all. They offer an alternative perspective on development models that often exclude the indigenous experience. And they promote the mutual respect and intercultural understanding that is a precondition for a society without poverty and prejudice."

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Mr. Ban Ki-Moon continued and said, "... I pledge the full support of the United Nations system to collaborate with indigenous peoples, including their media, to promote the full implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. He also called on the world nations, who are members of the United Nations, Member States, and mainstream media to create and maintain opportunities for indigenous peoples to articulate their perspectives, priorities and aspirations."

Said NNHRC Executive Director Leonard Gorman, "It is absolutely great for the U.N. Secretary-General to emphasize on the media this year. I hope it's the focus again next year until it's apparent to everyone that indigenous people exist here and now and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People is well known and accepted as the norm. We do have priorities and aspirations. We have perspectives about violations of human rights."

In a statement acknowledging World's Indigenous Peoples Day, said Director-General of the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, Irina Bokova said, "Indigenous Peoples face ... the sharpest edges of change from poverty and social injustice, from discrimination and marginalization. This cannot stand. To succeed, sustainable development must be inclusive. All voices must not only be heard but listened to."

"At a time when debate has opened on the contours of a new global sustainability, the voices of indigenous peoples must be heard," said Bokova in her statement to mark the day. "Their rights, cultures and the *knowledge systems* must be taken into account."

Having read Ms. Bokova's statement, Gorman said, "Absolutely. Navajos have a value system, principles handed to us, of which Navajo human rights are based." He continued and said, "When we assert our human rights, my people are labelled as protesters, as grassroots activists, instead they recognize their perspectives and aspirations are not valued and respected."

Media is simply a medium for citizens. When indigenous peoples who have dual citizenship in the United States, are censored or filtered by those with different beliefs systems and values, the media has shortchanged their community.

Not only is it important to continue increasing diversity in news rooms, a commendable achievement, higher level positions must be filled with those who aspire to lessening the divide of us versus "tribal people," or us versus the "rez."

"Let us use the media—indigenous and non-indigenous, and especially new outlets—to create bridges and establish a truly intercultural world, where diversity is celebrated; a world different cultures not only coexist but value each other for their contributions and potential," said the U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon in his statement yesterday.

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