



Navajo Nation Council - Office of the Speaker

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December 17, 2007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Navajo Nation represented at United Nations work session in Switzerland

GENEVA, Switzerland – The United Nations working group on Human Rights of Indigenous People concluded their two-week work session on Friday, Dec. 14, 2007 in Geneva. The work session was conducted to draft a final resolution to be submitted to the United Nations (U.N.) Human Rights Commission (HRC).

The Honorable Speaker Lawrence T. Morgan (Iyanbito/Pinedale) and a Navajo delegation led by Council Delegate Rex Lee Jim (Rock Point) attended this work session on behalf of the Navajo Nation, which began on Dec. 3.

Speaker Morgan attended the work session the first week and was accompanied by his Chief of Staff - Dr. James Davis, Jr.; Legislative Staff Assistant - Charles Long; Dept. of Justice attorney - Candice Martine; and Legislative Branch Press Officer - Joshua Lavar Butler. Rex Lee Jim and Charles Long stayed in Switzerland for the entire two-weeks to lobby for support of the declaration.

The Navajo delegation was among several indigenous representatives from across the world that gathered to negotiate and suggest changes to the draft declaration that will be submitted to the HRC for consideration.

The draft declaration to the U.N. is a collaborative effort by the HRC to positively change the way indigenous people are treated around the world, while creating international law to strengthen human rights. These discussions will help guide governments in their relationships with indigenous people.

The declaration took more than 10-years to be established and it heavily required the participation of indigenous people in the U.N. process. There are many fundamental issues that needed discussion and the conference provided a venue for this dialogue.

A handful of Native American tribes from the western hemisphere, particularly the United States, have become major players in the efforts to promote the human rights declaration for indigenous people.

The Navajo Nation Council has taken a leading role in insuring that this resolution is pushed forward by working diligently for years to incorporate their perspectives into the draft declaration. This draft declaration was first released in 1995 for public comment and has since taken on a life of its own.

Indigenous concerns are echoed around the world, evident by the representation from Mexico, South America, North America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

The Navajo Nation Council and Speaker Morgan have a strong interest in the U.N.'s activities and attended this work session to help strategize ways to strengthen efforts to convince the U.N. Council's approval. The U.N. is currently going through reform and work session participants agreed that it was the prime time to develop trust and to move on efforts to receive positive results.

The Navajo Nation Council has been actively involved in the negotiations to draft a resolution since 1995, in order to engage in international issues to further Native American interests.

Council Delegate Ervin M. Keeswood (Tse Daa Kaan) has also been very influential in the drafting of this resolution and he attended previous work sessions and meetings on behalf of the Navajo Nation Council, but did not attend this recent work session in Switzerland. Keeswood plans to attend future meetings.

The U.N. working group is tasked with reviewing developments that pertain to the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous people, including their human rights and their fundamental freedoms.

The working group submitted their final draft of the resolution to the HRC, which will then be presented to the U.N. General Assembly for acceptance. The U.N. has 46 members that are represented from countries around the world.

One recurring strategy for work session participants was to avoid language that would duplicate any other mandate of the U.N., which would cause delays or possibly jeopardize the working group's chances of the acceptance and approval of the declaration.

The adoption of the declaration by the U.N. General Assembly is no easy task and members of the working group of indigenous people had to lobby the States for approval, the States are member countries from around the world.

Several States questioned the declaration's intent. The Russian Federation, for example, did not support the establishment of such a body and they insisted that the declaration duplicated the role of the U.N. Special Reporter, which is another organization under the HRC.

The country of Denmark on the other hand thought that the draft declaration was a well thought out mandate and was willing to support the idea and proposal. They made note that there was a lot of support for the proposal and that a lot of attention has been put on this declaration.

A United States representative explained that the U.S. welcomes the opportunity, but they did not show strong support for indigenous rights.

Rex Lee Jim made a suggestion to the working group that the HRC needs to make sure that we have as many experts that are indigenous people appointed to the Human Rights Council as well.

Mr. Jim explained to the U.N. Council that the Navajo Nation is in the process of enacting a human rights commission of their own on the reservation to deal with similar violations.

"We have attorneys that specialize in human rights and we know that people have very similar problems." Jim explained. "Indigenous people are capable of advocating on their own."

Speaker Morgan explained that indigenous people have been struggling to control their land, their resources, and their own destiny. He said that "it is for these reasons that we continue to fight for these rights.

"There has been little progress and movement towards strengthening rights for indigenous people and it's good to see indigenous people coming together to be one

strong voice for human rights,” Speaker Morgan said. “We have certainly become effective and significant actors in the world – I am pleased that the Navajo Nation has taken a leading role in the advocacy of human rights.”

Speaker Morgan added that “countries, referred to as States, have historically lacked the understanding of human rights for indigenous people. In order to have a full understanding of our efforts, you have to understand our position as indigenous people.”

Indigenous people in the U.S. are a step ahead of other indigenous groups of the world and Native American tribes have exercised their right to sovereignty as a way to exert their political power to sustain some of the cultural practices that have sustained them as a people for generations.

“It is very important to promote the rights of indigenous people,” Speaker Morgan said. “We need to protect our cultures, our land, and our resources. In order to respect culture, one must know the struggles that indigenous people have gone through.”

Indigenous people continue to experience challenges in protecting their ancestral lands from environmental injustice, which affects all people of the world.

Speaker Morgan said that the Navajo Nation continues to exist on their ancestral lands within the four-sacred mountains and many other indigenous people around the world are not afforded that same privilege. There are a lot of Indian tribes here in America that has been uprooted from their homelands, which was caused by forced government relocation.

Speaker Morgan added that the implementation of the declaration is vital to the continued existence to the indigenous peoples, especially to the Navajo Nation. “We need to move forward and be assertive in our efforts to bring justice to indigenous people – this is definitely an urgent issue that needs to be heard.”

Legislative Staff Assistant, Charles Long, explained that he and Delegate Rex Lee Jim were satisfied with the final draft of the resolution that was put together and submitted.

The deadline for the final draft of the resolution was due at 6 p.m. on Dec. 11, and the Ambassador from Bolivia planned to help get the resolution on the HRC’s agenda.

The resolution is now in the hands of the HRC, where it will become a legal document. The final draft of the resolution will become the guiding principle for the Caucus and for the human rights of indigenous people.

Charles Long explained that there are a lot of indigenous people that do not have formal governments and States do not recognize them. “We should be treated differently and we, as the Navajo Nation, should be recognized as a nation by the U.N.”

The U.N. General Assembly meets annually and the declaration may be considered at the upcoming Winter session.

For more information, contact Joshua Lavar Butler with the Office of the Speaker at 928-871-7160.