

## **All Human Rights for All**

by Charmaine White Face "All human rights for all" was the title for the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration by adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on Dec. 10, 1948, more than 56 years ago. The time of the adoption was at the conclusion of World War II. The participating Nation-States, including the United States, were very aware of the impact of human rights violations on the whole human family. Yet, today, those same human rights that were so generously proposed in that noble document are still denied to Indigenous peoples throughout the world.

Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Universal Declaration of Human Rights

For almost twenty (20) years, Indigenous peoples (in the US this would mean Native American or American Indian people) and their friends and allies have been attending meetings at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, to try to bring equal Human Rights to all human beings as put forth in Article I. A Draft was developed by UN experts with the input of representatives from Indigenous peoples from throughout the world.

A Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was approved in the early 1990s, after more than eight years of development, by the UN experts called the Working Group on Indigenous Populations [WGIP]. It was also approved and passed by another UN body of experts on the subject, the Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities.

Most organizations, when a task is assigned to their experts, and the experts give their recommendations, then the organization follows the recommendations of their experts as this action will give the best results for the organization. Unfortunately, the United Nations, in this case, did not listen to two bodies of their own experts. It raises the question of whether there have been any other issues on which two UN expert bodies recommendations were ignored? Or are the recommendations of these two expert bodies being ignored because it involves Indigenous peoples which would be clearly a case of discrimination.

In 1994, the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was then sent to another Working Group called the Intersessional Working Group on the Draft Declaration [WGDD]. In a magnanimous gesture, Indigenous peoples were allowed to attend and fully participate...again. Nevermind that Indigenous peoples, at great expense to most, had been participating for years in the development of the Draft both with the WGIP and the Subcommission. This new Working Group was to debate the Draft for a ten year period!

This past December was the final meeting of the WGDD. Changes were being offered willy-nilly from every corner of the room. It was conceivable that for each word in the Draft, two-hundred, three-hundred or more suggestions could be offered for each word. The procedures being used were that chaotic and unorganized. All of this was and is at the expense of the very lives of Indigenous peoples from throughout the world.

It was time to make the myriad whirlwinds of the WGDD stand still and look at what was happening. A small group of Indigenous peoples, six in all, conducted a prayer fast-hunger strike to try to bring some semblance of order to the process, and to let the Commission on Human Rights and the world know of the farce that was being made of this process. The chairman of the WGDD had stated he was not going to send the original Draft to the Commission when it meets this coming March and that was also a concern of the fasters. The Commission on Human Rights is the body that would make a decision on the passage of the Declaration so it can continue on up the UN ladder.

During the prayer fast-hunger strike, hundreds of e-mails representing millions of Indigenous peoples from all over the world poured in supporting the passage of the original Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, or what is also known as the Subcommission text. These messages were attached to a bulletin board for all to see, particularly the delegates from the Nation-States. Yet, the whirlwind of confusion continued in the meeting room for the entire week even down to the last few minutes when the language interpreters turned off their microphones and walked out at the end of their shift.

The UN Commission on Human Rights will begin meeting on March 14, 2005. In their agenda will be the ten years of work of the WGDD on the Draft Declaration including the fact that no consensus was reached on its passage. Will the report include a courageous statement saying that no consensus was reached because of a few obstructionist States, like the US of A; I doubt it. Yet, at this time, the UN Commission on Human Rights is almost the only place for Indigenous peoples to approach and have some influence on the Nation-States.

The Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples needs to be passed now. Indigenous peoples all over the world have suffered too long, hundreds of years in most cases, at the hands of colonizing Nation-States. What can we, Indigenous peoples and our friends, do? Contact Louise Arbour, the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, about the need to pass the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples...now. (A form letter is included for those that don't have the right words or address.)

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Charmaine White Face, an Oglala Tetuwan (Lakota language speakers) from the Oceti Sakowin (Great Sioux Nation) is the spokesperson for the Teton Sioux Nation Treaty Council which has been attending meetings at the United Nations for the past 22 years. She participated in the prayer fast-hunger strike at the Dec. 2004 WGDD meeting in Geneva. She is a writer, grandmother, and coordinator for a volunteer organization, Defenders of the Black Hills. She may be reached at bhdefenders@msn.com or P.O. Box 2003, Rapid City, SD 57709.

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Louise Arbour High Commissioner for Human Rights United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Palais des Nations 1209, Geneva, Switzerland

Re: Draft Declaration on the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Dear Ms. Arbour:

The Draft Declaration on the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples was developed by the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations over an eight year period with the input from a large number of Indigenous Peoples from all over the world. The Declaration was then adopted in 1994 by the Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. After being deliberated for a decade in the Working Group on the Draft Declaration, it is time now for the Commission on Human Rights to approve the original Subcommission Declaration.

Millions of Indigenous Peoples continue to suffer every year as they wait for the Declaration to be adopted. How many are hoping that future generations of Indigenous Peoples and Nation-States can live together seeking peaceful solutions to issues of human rights violations? No, the Declaration will not correct the problems faced in all parts of the world as it is only an aspiration, but it is a seed for the growth of human rights for Indigenous Peoples, rights that are long overdue. It is long past time that this shameful situation is corrected.

Please, Ms. Arbour, encourage the Commission on Human Rights to approve the adoption of the original Subcommission Declaration on the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples at the upcoming meeting in March and April, 2005.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

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Name

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Address

City

State

Postal Code

Country