



STATEMENT

BY

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ON

**AGENDA ITEM 65:
RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

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Madame Chair,

The delegation of Guyana is pleased to participate in today's debate on Agenda Item 65: Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

I take this opportunity to thank the Secretary General for his reports.

Guyana aligns with the statement delivered by the representative of Belize on behalf of the Caribbean Community.

Madame Chair,

The Government of Guyana remains firmly committed to the advancement of the rights of Indigenous Peoples in all spheres of human development. Indigenous Peoples have come a far way in Guyana - from a neglected and marginalized people to being accorded the recognition of their place in history as Guyana's first people. Today, they are partnering with Government in the developmental thrust of Guyana.

Allow me to briefly address two relevant recommendations highlighted in the Secretary General's report. First on the issue of governance and participation in policy decisions, I wish to highlight that Guyana's national laws and policies underscore the "equality of all peoples" and explicitly prohibit discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, gender and religion. As such indigenous peoples' rights are enshrined in the constitution.

Our Constitution places Indigenous Welfare high on its Agenda for development of the people of Guyana. Chapter 3 Section 40 of the Constitution of Guyana speaks to the issue of the fundamental rights and freedom of the individual Guyanese. Section 149 (G) of the Constitution is more specific and addresses the Indigenous Peoples' Rights. "Indigenous Peoples shall have the right to the protection,

preservation and promulgation of their language, cultural heritage and way of life.” While the ILO Convention 169 sets the minimum standards for Indigenous Peoples’ development; our Legislation goes beyond that and grants extensive rights to the Amerindian culture.

More importantly, Guyana is among a very few countries to have enacted a specific piece of legislation, the Amerindian Act No. 6 of 2006, which comprehensively provides for the recognition and protection of the collective rights of Amerindian Villages and Communities and the promotion of good governance and rights to land and natural resources. Such a commitment derives from strong political willingness and capacity to legislate in favour of advancing the rights of indigenous peoples at all levels. This commitment is also demonstrated by Guyana’s active participation in the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples held in September 2014. As a member of the Amazonian Cooperation Treaty Organization, we continue to support the work to address the inequalities experienced by the indigenous peoples.

In addition, Indigenous Peoples are represented on five Constitutional Bodies established to provide redress on instances of alleged violation of human rights of citizens. The Ethnic Relations, Women and Gender Equality, Rights of the Child, Indigenous Peoples, and Human Rights Commissions offer direct opportunities for Amerindians to have recourse to address discrimination and rights issues affecting them.

Secondly, I wish to refer to the issue of constructive dialogue and engagement with national authorities.

Important and fundamental for action is an enabling environment for dialogue; this experience of engagement in Guyana contributes to mainstreaming indigenous peoples goals and challenges in keeping with the principle of free prior and informed consent.

The consultative dialogue between indigenous leaders and our government contributed to the strengthening partnership between Government and indigenous peoples in the execution and implementation of programmes and projects in priority areas identified by indigenous peoples. These include socio-economic development, preservation of culture and heritage, governance and leadership, youth development and bridging the digital divides.

Guyana has a track record of inclusionary governance and at no time in its history has there been such a high and widespread level of participation of indigenous people's in the body politic; most notably occupying leadership positions at the Parliamentary and Executive Levels of Government in addition to leadership portfolios at the regional and village levels that existed prior.

Legislating for Indigenous Peoples' rights to choose their leaders at the village level has expanded Guyana's democratic credentials as it ensures the strengthening of governance system in keeping with the principles of self-determination as stated in Article 3 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Guyana is one of the few countries that prides itself for having established the legislative framework of indigenous rights, even before the United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples rights was submitted for member countries' approval.

Madam Chair,

Many challenges that face the indigenous communities. The rugged terrain of Guyana and the remoteness of communities pose difficulties for the delivery of certain social services. Unemployment and opportunities for economic advancement continue to be obstacles. Even so, to ensure the indigenous communities are not left behind in the digital age, the

Government continues to increase the computer literacy of indigenous people where it is expected that in the very near future 100 indigenous communities will benefit from computers facilities. Youth entrepreneurship is another important focus for Government. The Ministry of Amerindian Affairs is engaging approximately 1300 young people in 160 Amerindian communities in areas of construction, solar panel installation, road building and monitoring and evaluation programmes where they learn on the job and the skills and knowledge remains in their villages. The Presidential Grants programme which was launched in 2007 provides communities with the financial resources necessary to fund projects within their communities and help to make them more economically viable. The projects range from expansion of village farms, to eco lodges to cattle rearing. These initiatives are additional to other national initiatives that are taking place including scholarship programmes for tertiary education.

Madame Chair,

In September 2014, Guyana celebrated Amerindian Heritage Month under the theme *“Traditional Embodiment for Amerindian Development.”* At the launch of this Month, Head of State President Donald Ramotar reaffirmed the Government’s support for the preservation of indigenous languages. In Guyana, the Arawak and Warraus languages face greater threat of extinction, and are a special focus of an Amerindian language revival programme. The construction of schools with living accommodation; the facilitation of housing development; legislation to protect Amerindians and their properties, as well as veto power to allow small and medium-scale mining in their respective communities are major achievements of the indigenous peoples of Guyana.

Guyana recognizes Indigenous peoples’ direct role and contribution in the protection of our natural environment, for which Government and the people of Guyana are forever grateful. The Government’s determination to

advance its Low Carbon Development Strategy in pursuit of a low carbon and climate resilient economy remains committed to allocating financing received for standing forests to benefit the village economy and to advance opportunities for indigenous youths.

Madam Chair,

In conclusion, the Government of Guyana recognizes and accepts that our achievement as a country could only have been possible due to the strong partnership with Indigenous peoples. We believe that indigenous peoples are their own protagonist for change and that the outcome document of the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples reflects the wishes of the Indigenous Peoples in the development of the post 2015 development agenda. Going forward Government remains fully committed to ensure the rights of indigenous peoples are upheld in keeping with international best practices, even while we grapple with addressing the existing gaps and challenges in our country.

I thank you.