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STUDY OF THE PROBLEM OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

Written statement submitted by the Baha'i International
Community, a non-governmental organization in
consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[2 August 1984]

The Baha'i International Community expresses its support for the very important work undertaken by the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities during the last several years in promoting the rights of indigenous peoples. In particular, we welcome the very thorough study by the Special Rapporteur, Mr. Martínez Cobo, on the problem of discrimination against indigenous populations. We commend the recently-established Working Group on Indigenous Populations for its efforts to study the human rights situation in this area and to develop standards concerning the rights of indigenous populations. We hope that these important initiatives will spur continuing action by the international community aimed at ensuring the full protection of the rights of indigenous peoples.

In view of the attention now being devoted in the Working Group to the evolution of standards in this area, the Baha'i International Community would like to outline briefly the Baha'i perspective on the rights of indigenous populations.

Baha'is believe in the fundamental oneness of all mankind: that the body of mankind, like the body of an individual, suffers when any of its parts are harmed, and that the denial of rights to any segment of human society prevents the whole of humanity from benefiting from the orderly development of the talents and faculties inherent in that segment. Baha'is believe that man is a spiritual being with an inherent capacity for growth and development; that he has a potential, whatever his race, colour or culture, to make positive contributions to the welfare of all mankind; and that this potential is enhanced by the recognition and protection of those rights which allow him to realize his full capacities. Therefore, the advantage of the whole of humanity is best served by providing for the sound development of all its parts.

While emphasizing the paramount importance of unity for mankind at this time, Baha'is also prize diversity in unity and appreciate the potential of each individual and group to contribute constructively to the well-being of human society. Rather than ignoring or advocating the suppression of the diversity of ethnical origins, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit that differentiate the peoples of the world, Baha'is affirm and respect them. Thus, indigenous populations must have the fundamental right to develop and take pride in their own identity, culture and language.

Baha'is confidently envisage the continuation of the process of social and cultural evolution. Therefore, while admiring and respecting the ancient traditions of indigenous populations and the contribution they currently make to society, we anticipate that, when all peoples have access to education based on spiritual principles and sound scientific thinking and information, the contribution of these peoples to the advance of civilization will be greatly enhanced. Inevitably, some long-established traditions will be discarded as being in violation of common humanity, contrary to reason, divisive of society or barriers to the efflorescence of the human spirit, but we believe that others should be actively fostered and perpetuated as living links with the past, as enrichments of the colourful diversity of mankind.

An important element of the fundamental right of the members of indigenous populations to take pride in their own identity and culture is their right to learn, speak, write and communicate in their native tongue, if they so wish, in addition to the official language of the country in which they reside, for language is the expression of the spirit of a people, and the vehicle of its cohesive and inspiring traditions. Facility in one's native language in addition to the official language of one's country can produce an enrichment of the heritage of the entire people and can act as a stabilizing influence in society, while the cultural oppression which seeks to obliterate minority languages can have a deracinating and demoralizing effect that will be very difficult to correct. Furthermore, Baha'is advocate the development or adoption of an international auxiliary language by which all the peoples of all countries and cultural backgrounds will be able to communicate.

Concerning the right to education, Baha'is advocate a programme of universal education for all peoples, of whatever race or culture, and for men and women alike. The aim must be to make education of the highest possible quality available to every segment of the population. In some cases indigenous populations may have special needs which must be taken into account. These would include, for example, as pointed out by the Special Rapporteur in chapter XIII of his study, ^{1/} the need for school facilities which are accessible to rural areas as well as for teachers who have command of the native tongue.

The education of indigenous populations, like that of other populations, should encourage the acquisition of such spiritual qualities as understanding,

^{1/} Study of the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations, (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1983/21/Add.2), chapter XIII, pp. 31-49.

compassion and honesty, and should foster the development of a heartfelt appreciation for other cultures and the elimination of prejudices of all kinds. 2/

In conclusion, in the Baha'i view, the full enjoyment of human rights by indigenous peoples requires a recognition that such populations form part of a diversified world community and contribute, through the uniqueness of their cultures, to the enrichment of the whole of society. In this spirit, we express the sincere hope that the international community, Governments and the indigenous peoples themselves will work together to ensure the full protection of the rights of indigenous populations.

2/ Ibid., p.81, para.289; p.94, paras.333 and 335.