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THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[5 February 2003]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Large Dams and Development

More than 35,000 large dams have been erected since 1950. The People's Republic of China alone has built more than 19,000 dams since 1949. India has constructed more than 3,000 since independence. More than 400,000 square kilometers have been inundated by reservoirs worldwide.

The construction of large dams continues to be a highly contentious development issue. The proponents are emphasizing that large dams have a tremendous impact on the energy production. They say dams account for almost 20% of electricity generation and for more than 10% of global food production. The opponents are citing their negative environmental and social impacts, particularly the relocation of masses of people, who are largely members of indigenous or marginal socio-economic communities. Approximately 40 to 80 million people have been relocated for the construction of dams in the last four decades. At the planning stage, the numbers of both directly and indirectly affected people have been underestimated. Little or no meaningful participation of affected people in the planning and implementation of dam projects is taking place. In India alone, more than 20 million people have been displaced in the past 40 years and it has been estimated that as many as 75 percent of the people have not been rehabilitated. According to Indian government declarations, 40 percent of all who have been displaced by dams are Adivasi indigenous people. Large dams have serious impacts on the cultures, lives, livelihoods and spiritual existence of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have suffered disproportionately from the negative impacts of large dams.

In India more than 100,000 indigenous Adivasi in the valley of the river Narmada are threatened by relocation. At least 120,000 people from indigenous communities in the highlands of Northern and Central Vietnam will be resettled until 2006 due to large dam projects. Tens of thousands of members of indigenous peoples in Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Panama, Canada, Malaysia, the Philippines will be relocated against their will in short time due to the planned construction of dams. Numerous case studies have demonstrated that forced displacement tears apart communities, disrupts patterns of social interaction and interpersonal ties, destabilizes and renders useless community based networks. This dismantling of social ties may leave the individual person physically intact, but it destroys communities and the identity of indigenous peoples. The great majority of people displaced by dams have statistically disappeared, swallowed up by urban slums of migrant labourers.

Many large dams suffer massive cost-overruns and time delays. They have proven to be uneconomic, even before accounting for their social and environmental costs. Large dams cause great environmental damage, including the loss of farmland, wetland and forests and the extinction of fish and other aquatic species.

The World Commission on Dams (WCD), which has been founded in February 1998 by the World Bank and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) with a mandate "to review the effectiveness of dams and assess alternatives for water resources and energy development" and "to develop internationally –accepted standards, guidelines and criteria for decision-making in the planning, design, construction, monitoring,

operation and decommissioning of dams” concluded in its report “Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making”, published in November 2000, that large dams have provided some benefits, but at huge environmental, social and economical costs. The World Commission on Dams appealed to international public financial institutions, the dam industry and governments to adopt some recommendations in order to reduce the “human costs” of large dams. Governments and international financial institutions applauded the report, but unfortunately until today they didn’t adopt the main recommendations of WCD.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the UN Human Rights Commission to appeal to governments and international financial institutions to adopt the recommendations of WCD regarding large dams and to implement a moratorium on the construction of new large dams until the recommendations of WCD fully have been incorporated into their policies and practices..
