

**OPENING SESSION OF THE TWENTY FOURTH SESSION OF  
THE UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES**

New York, 21 April 2025

Your Excellency **António Guterres**, Secretary-General,

Your Excellency **Bob Rae**, President of Economic and Social Council,

Your Excellency **Lena Yanina Estrada**, Minister for Environment from Colombia,

**Mr. Li Junhua**, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs,

Distinguished Members of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues,

Distinguished Elders, Delegates, Indigenous sisters and brothers,

I open this twenty-fourth session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues with deep respect for our Peoples and a firm commitment to our shared responsibilities.

We begin by recognizing the Onondaga Nation, the original stewards of this land, and by expressing our gratitude to Tadodaho Sid Hill, the traditional Chief of the Onondaga Nation, for once again welcoming us to their territory. Let us also thank the Indigenous youth who accompanied us with grace into the General Assembly Hall, their violin performance honoring our elders, our women, and the sacred memory of those who came before us. Their music carried the spirit of our ancestors into this house of nations—a place of dialogue, multilateralism, and shared responsibility. Yupaichani.

I am deeply grateful to my fellow Members of the Forum for their confidence in electing me to serve as Chair of this session. Together, we will build on the path already pioneered by our predecessors. I am grateful to my sister Ms. Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, President of the Twenty-Third Session, for her leadership, commitment, wisdom, and vision.

I am fortunate to count two former Chairs among my colleagues, so I could not pass up this opportunity to acknowledge the tremendous and inspiring leadership of my brother,

Dario Mejia Montalvo, also a former Chair of the Forum. He has earned my great admiration and respect.

I take this moment to acknowledge the continued commitment and dedication of former Chairs and members of the Forum who, over time, have provided me with encouragement and advice. Finally, I would not be on the Forum without the joint nomination of the Inuit Circumpolar Council and the Saami Council. Qujanaq. Giitu.

I grew up on a small island in a fly-in community located on the eastern part of the Arctic in Canada with a population made up of less than all the people in this room. It was the centre of my universe, and I imagined that I would grow up and live there and have children there. I would not have described it as an isolated or remote community nor would I have described our environment as harsh – adjectives that are so often used to describe the Arctic – our home.

Televisions were not allowed in my community until I was ten years old and even then, not everyone had a television. Up until that time, through community plebiscites, community members had voted against allowing televisions into our community because there was a fear that they would negatively impact on our language and culture. Protecting our language and our culture has continued to be paramount. Inuit want to continue speaking Inuktitut. Inuit want to continue to live life as Inuit. We want to thrive as Inuit.

The advocacy work – the work undertaken to protect Indigenous Peoples rights is personal. When I use the International Decade of Indigenous Languages as a vehicle to underline the importance of Indigenous Peoples receiving essential public services in Indigenous Languages I am thinking about unilingual family members and community members who are unable to receive essential public services in Inuktitut – the only language that they know how to speak. I am thinking about how family members and community members are not being afforded the human right of dignity in their own homeland.

When I look around this room, I know that each of you has your story – stories of where you are from, stories of your motivation, stories of hardships, stories of success, stories of acts of resistance. Our stories may be a bit different but what brings us together is a deep desire to continue to assert who we are as Indigenous Peoples. We want to unapologetically thrive as Indigenous Peoples. This is why it is so crucially and personally important to

Indigenous Peoples that the universal framework to promote the rights, dignity, and well-being of Indigenous Peoples worldwide be fully implemented. Thank you for your continued efforts.

I thank each of you for traveling the long distances to be here today. I welcome each of you—especially my Indigenous sisters and brothers from around the world. Your presence here is a powerful reminder that, despite centuries of colonization, marginalization, and violence, Indigenous peoples continue to resist creatively, always joyfully in the face of adversity, and united with our Mother Earth, defending our rights to ensure a better future for future generations.

Also, I want to take a moment to remember and honor all those who are not here with us. Those who for whatever reason were not able to travel here to join us and those who came before us—our ancestors, our elders, and the countless Indigenous leaders and activists who sacrificed their lives to defend the rights we continue to assert.

Excellencies, colleagues, friends,

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has long served as a vital platform—a space where Indigenous Peoples bring our priorities, wisdom, and concerns to the center of international discourse. This forum wasn't simply given—it exists today because Indigenous Peoples fought long and hard for recognition, representation, and a voice at the global level. And while it has enabled important dialogue, it must also continue to drive transformative action.

This year's theme—*“Implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples within Member States and the United Nations system, including identifying good practices and addressing challenges”*—compels us to ask: where do we stand?

Yes, we have seen progress. Since the Forum's establishment, significant gains have been made. The adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007 was a historic milestone, grounded in decades of advocacy. The 2014 World Conference on Indigenous Peoples reaffirmed global commitments and prompted mechanisms like the UN System-Wide Action Plan and the ongoing consultations to enhance Indigenous Peoples' participation at the UN.

But let us be honest: progress remains uneven and, in many cases, merely symbolic. Too many Indigenous Peoples are still excluded from decisions that directly affect what is most sacred to us—our lands, territories, cultures, and the future of our communities. These are not abstract concepts; they are the very foundation of our identity, survival, and self-determination.

Some States, after affirming their recognition of Indigenous Peoples through their affirmative vote in the adoption of the Declaration, have subsequently refused to recognize them within their own borders. Instead, they have chosen to call them by other names. I invite you to discuss this persistent and regrettable situation.

Violations of Indigenous Peoples' rights—and our fundamental human rights—persist. Our leaders continue to be criminalized and persecuted, and in some cases, they have lost their lives for defending their peoples and territories. Sacred sites are taken without our free, prior, and informed consent and are desecrated. Indigenous women and girls continue to face disproportionate levels of violence and marginalization. In many communities, as Indigenous men are disappeared or targeted, women are left to carry the burden, becoming the heads of their families and defenders of their peoples.

The implementation of UNDRIP must go beyond symbolic recognition. It must be fully integrated into national laws, policies, and institutions. It must inform development, environmental protection, and peacebuilding efforts. It must be reflected in budgets and financial investment and the work of every State at all levels, as well as every UN body.

This session places a powerful spotlight on some of the most urgent and interconnected issues facing Indigenous Peoples today.

This year, we inaugurate a new intergenerational and interregional dialogue focusing on the **rights of Indigenous women**. Across the globe, Indigenous women stand at the crossroads of gender-based discrimination, colonial violence, and systemic marginalization. Yet, they are also protectors of knowledge, guardians of biodiversity, cultural leaders, and agents of change. Their role must not only be recognized—it must be resourced and respected. The adoption of CEDAW General Recommendation No. 39 is an important step, but it must be implemented with the leadership of Indigenous women themselves at every stage.

The global push for the so-called green transition has intensified demand for critical minerals —lithium, cobalt, nickel, and others—many of which lie beneath sacred Indigenous lands and territories. We cannot ignore the threat this poses to our rights, lands, and way of life. Extractive activities, when carried out in disregard of the right to self-determination and the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples, become another form of colonization. We are not anti-development—but development must be on our terms and must be just. It must respect our forms of self-governance, uphold environmental safeguards, and include equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms. This session will explore how to uphold the principles of UNDRIP in the context of the green economy, ensuring that solutions to climate change do not become new forms of exploitation of Indigenous Peoples.

Implementation also requires investment. Too often, **financial resources** designated for Indigenous Peoples are diverted, delayed, or managed by intermediaries. This undermines our autonomy, diminishes our impact, and perpetuates dependency. Direct, sustained, and **accessible financing** must support Indigenous-led initiatives, institutions, and knowledge systems. No one is better placed to define priorities than Indigenous Peoples ourselves. We have the solutions. If the international community is serious about achieving the 2030 Agenda, it must invest in Indigenous leadership and co-create mechanisms that are equitable, transparent, and rooted in partnership.

Excellencies, friends,

We have come far—but the road ahead remains long. UNDRIP is not a document to be celebrated once a year—it is a living framework that must guide how we govern, how we invest, and how we treat one another on this shared Mother Earth. Its full and effective implementation is not optional—it is a moral, legal, and collective obligation.

As the United Nations embarks on its next 80 years, it is imperative that Indigenous Peoples are not merely seen as beneficiaries of development, but as active partners, solution-makers, as demonstrated in various forums, and decision-makers in global processes. Only through this can we achieve true justice, sustainability, and respect for all on this planet.

Furthermore, it is crucial that Indigenous Peoples are not mixed with other sectors of society, as this undermines the years of advocacy and recognition we have earned. Our rights are distinct and must not be conflated with those of other groups, especially those related to

the environment, biodiversity, and climate change. This distinction is vital for ensuring that our rights, concerns, and contributions are properly recognized and respected.

I **call on Member States** to work hand in hand with Indigenous Peoples—not only as stakeholders but as rights-holders, knowledge-holders, and co-creators of solutions. Member States must ensure that Indigenous Peoples are fully respected in decision-making processes, with their governance systems and rights upheld in every aspect of policy and governance. I **urge UN entities** to embed Indigenous Peoples' rights at the core of their work—not as a mere checkbox, but as a fundamental principle of justice, equity, and effectiveness. To achieve this, **both Member States and UN entities** should actively utilize the recommendations of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, as well as those from the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, ensuring these are reflected in policy and practice.

**To my fellow Indigenous Peoples**, I say: we are not alone. Our unity, wisdom, and determination remain our greatest strengths. Let us continue to walk together—across generations, across territories, and across the world.

I extend my gratitude to my fellow Forum Members, who will engage actively over the next two weeks in examining challenges, sharing solutions, and holding the system accountable to our shared goals. I thank the Secretariat for their tireless work and support.

Let us move forward together—with clarity of purpose, strength of spirit, and unwavering commitment to a world where the rights of Indigenous Peoples are fully respected, protected, and fulfilled.

Thank you.