

Briggs: Tense situation threatens UNPFII promise

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Photo courtesy Marilu Lopez Fretts/Four Directions Media -- Permanent Forum Chairman Victoria Tauli-Corpuz

One hour before the end of the United Nations' recent seventh annual Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, South and Central American indigenous leaders began to clap in unison and call for the right to speak.

The leaders would eventually speak, but not before armed U.N. guards threatened indigenous leaders with expulsion and the credibility of the forum's chairman came under question.

"I observed the frustration of the indigenous representatives from global south and north making comments that they felt were not reflected," said Tom Goldtooth, of the Indigenous Environmental Network. "Some of the frustrations I saw was the feeling that intergovernmental organizations, states and independent experts are given more weight than indigenous people."

The forum began in late April seeming sometimes to be like a honeymoon at the end of the 30-year battle for the adoption last September of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the U.N. General Assembly.

But the confidence in the proceeding began eroding midway through the two-week forum when U.N.-appointed leaders released a draft report endorsing a World Bank plan that the indigenous participants opposed. By the forum's last day, May 2, indigenous peoples were frustrated with Permanent Forum Chairman Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, an indigenous leader from the Philippines.

The World Bank plan, called Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, allows global fossil fuel corporations to pollute in one part of the world in exchange for preventing greenhouse emissions elsewhere on the globe.

On the forum's last day, while U.N. Rapporteur Mick Dodson read line-by-line edits to the 51-page report, South and Central American leaders asked Tauli-Corpuz hourly for an opportunity to rebut the report's endorsement of the World Bank plan. They were further outraged that the report draws support for the plan from a World Bank meeting in South America, where consultations were supposed to have taken place. Instead, indigenous people walked out in protest.

Tauli-Corpuz said in e-mailed comments May 21 that by the last day, only government representatives and U.N. appointees speak. This is primarily because the rapporteur has to read the final draft of the report into the record at a speed that translators can repeat into the many languages for participants.

Over lunch, South and Central American participants made plans to be heard, even if Tauli-Corpuz didn't relent.

At 5 p.m., participants, recorded and posted on YouTube by documentary filmmakers, began clapping, smiling and saying in Spanish, "We are indigenous. We need to speak. We have our rights."

(Watch the footage online at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=UtORVi7GybY>.)

Tauli-Corpuz called over the noise, "We will give you the floor after we finish our business."

But participants continued their demonstration because it was the forum's business that they wanted to affect.

Witnesses (and visual footage) say that for several minutes, Tauli-Corpuz and indigenous representatives, including the eight indigenous leaders appointed to run the forum, conferred. Among them was U.N.-appointed North American expert Tonya Gonnella Frichner, an Onondaga attorney who said in a telephone interview later that she was expressing concern for what was happening on the floor.

As this was occurring, armed U.N. guards walked into the meeting room. The guards stood among the Central and South American leaders, who clapped in classic, nonviolent pose. Yet, as can be seen on the video, one guard visibly fingered his gun. Other guards headed toward the voice speaking from the balcony in English.

Doug Anderson, a Tuscarora man whose uncle, Mad Bear Anderson, sought admission for the Six Nations to the U.N. in the 1950s, spoke into a microphone, saying, according to his recollection, "I am Haudenosaunee. This is Haudenosaunee territory. They have a right to speak."

SommerFilms' YouTube clip includes Anderson saying, "I am not represented by any experts."

While the South and Central Americans continued to clap, U.N. guards put their hands on the seated, ribbon-shirted Anderson and ordered him to stand.

At the podium, the U.N. secretariat asked Tauli-Corpuz what should be done. A U.N. official rushed to the balcony and ordered security to get out of the room. But, Tauli-Corpuz wrote, "I made the decision to order the security to back off. After security backed off, I allowed Florina to speak."

Florina Lopez, coordinator of the Indigenous Women's Biodiversity Network of Abya Yala, began speaking in Spanish, her words rushing out. A translation was provided by Rebecca Sommer of SommerFilms: "We recognize that the current government policies are to exploit indigenous territories. We have listened attentively. Indigenous organizations and nations are not represented." Then Lopez called for elimination of paragraphs that support the World Bank plan.

Later, the report (available online at www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/UNPFII_7session_report_advance.pdf) was approved by the Permanent Forum. It continues to recommend that the World Bank plan be implemented, though language is added that calls for indigenous peoples to be involved in decision making and for planning to follow guidelines in the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. The report will proceed to other U.N. bodies for further approvals.

Tauli-Corpuz, who is attending a U.N. meeting in Bonn, Germany, said that security followed procedures. U.N. procedures say that guards will rush to any demonstration. No further review is planned.

However, these events starkly mark the difference between hopes and realities for indigenous peoples in the U.N.

The Permanent Forum, Tauli-Corpuz wrote, is not an indigenous forum, nor is it a government one. It is a forum of U.N.-appointed indigenous experts, such as herself and Gonnella Frichner. These experts stand alone, making recommendations to the U.N., determining in closed-door meetings how they will render a balanced opinion for the U.N. about the predictably competing needs of indigenous peoples and economic powers.

There must be transparency.

Tauli-Corpuz must give a public explanation for these events, and what appears to be the silencing of indigenous opposition to the World Bank plan.

American Indian leaders in the U.S. need to use their powerful voices to call for explanations. The promise of the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues depends on it.

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