

**STATEMENT BY H.E. MR. MIROSLAV LAJČÁK, PRESIDENT OF THE
72ND SESSION OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, AT OPENING
CEREMONY OF THE 17TH SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS
PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES**

16 APRIL 2018
UN, NEW YORK

Madame Chair, Excellencies, Grand Chiefs and Chiefs, distinguished delegates, colleagues, indigenous friends from around the world,

Welcome to the United Nations. Welcome to our 17th Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. We have a lot of ground to cover, and a lot of issues to discuss. And, to start us off, I want to make four points this morning.

The first is on people. The very first words of the United Nations' Charter say, "we, the people". So, this is an Organisation of – and for – people. But, we have not always seen this, in our work. Too often, our meetings and events, here, have represented only certain types of people. Diplomats. Ministers. Dignitaries. UN officials. This, at times, prevented us from getting a reality check – from the ground. And it has allowed some of our activities to become too far removed from the experiences of people, around the world. But, this is changing. And we do not have to look farther than this hall, today, to see that. The United Nations is doing more. It is engaging people outside of this building – including indigenous people. And, I am proud to say that many of these efforts began here - inside this very hall.

11 years ago, the General Assembly put indigenous issues firmly on the international agenda. It adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the World's Indigenous Peoples. Then, it set about turning declarations into actions. In 2014, the Assembly gathered for the first World Conference on Indigenous Peoples. This was a big step. But the discussions confirmed that we had a long way to go. Not only in our work, to realise the rights of indigenous communities, on the ground. But also in building stronger partnerships between indigenous peoples and the United Nations. And, last year, the Assembly took another step. After two years of discussions, it decided to create a new space, for interactive hearings. These hearings should find ways to break down the barriers to the participation of indigenous peoples in the work of the United Nations. I am honoured to be presiding over the first one, tomorrow. And, I encourage you all to come with concrete ideas and proposals.

But, today, as we open this Forum, let us not forget: The United Nations is here for people. And that includes indigenous people. The steps taken by the General Assembly, so far, have had good results. But we cannot yet say that this Organisation has opened its doors wide enough. And so, we need to be more ambitious.

As my second point, however, I want to issue a warning: We cannot let recent progress hide the facts on the ground. These facts are bleak. But they need to be seen and heard, by all of us here. There are 370 million indigenous people in the world today. They make up just 5% of the world's population. But, when we take poverty into account, we see a spike in the figures. Because indigenous people amount to 15% of the world's poorest people. That is shocking. And, poverty is not the only challenge they face. Their human rights are being violated. They do not always have access to decent housing and schools. They are being excluded and marginalised from the systems that should protect them. They are facing violence, and even death – just for asserting their basic rights. And, they are losing the lands and resources they depend on, for survival.

Which brings me to my third point, on the theme of this year's Forum. We are here to focus on indigenous land, territories and resources. And, so we should. Because, they are being taken away. Indigenous people are being dispossessed. They are losing the lands their ancestors called home. But, even when they can hold onto their own territories, it is still not plain sailing. Their land - and its resources - are being degraded around them. Sometimes this is because of human activity. Other times, it is caused by climate change.

In March, I convened a high-level event on water. During it, we heard from Autumn Peltier, a 13-year old water activist, from the Wikwemikong First Nation. She spoke about the crucial role that water plays, in her community. And, she told us about her fears that this water will dry up – or become too polluted to drink. So, she made a call to action. And, I want to echo it today. She said, “We cannot just pray anymore. We must do something - and we need to do it now”. We can no longer talk about indigenous lands as if they are like any others. We need to better understand their significance – for the communities they belong to. They represent livelihoods. Spirituality. Family. And, indeed, survival. So, I am glad we are focusing on this issue, for the 17th Forum.

As my final point, I want to look ahead. The signs do look positive. The United Nations has been doing more, to open its doors to indigenous people. And, it does not end there. On the ground, the United Nations' teams are developing stronger partnerships. I saw this myself, when I travelled to Colombia last month. In the western town of Totoró, I visited indigenous communities. I saw how closely they are working with various United Nations agencies. And, I saw how determined they are, to make their communities stronger – and to ensure that the peace agreement sticks.

Other encouraging signs are being seen – at national-level. In recent years, many states have deepened their engagement with indigenous peoples. New laws and policies have been adopted. And these are helping to protect and promote the rights of indigenous peoples. Some countries are even recognising indigenous institutions. This means that the bodies and people chosen to represent indigenous communities can better interact with national policy makers. I am sure we will hear about many of these best practices, during the Forum. So, we should be hopeful. But we cannot ignore the very real, and very serious, challenges. They cast a shadow over the future of many indigenous communities. And they demand our urgent attention.

Excellencies, dear friends,

Our resolutions, and our speeches, can make it seem like everything is perfect. They emphasise the rights of indigenous peoples. They recognise the value of indigenous culture and heritage. And, they encourage greater interaction, integration and participation of indigenous peoples in the decisions that affect them. But, everything is not perfect. The reality for indigenous peoples is very different to how it sounds, on paper. None of our resolutions talk about their desperation. None of our speeches can give credit to their pain. They deserve more than just our words. Words cannot protect their ancestral lands. Words cannot keep their lakes clean. And, words cannot make sure there is a future ahead, for their children. And so, I hope we can have a Permanent Forum, which goes beyond words. And, a Permanent Forum, which focuses - not on politics or positions - but on people.

Thank you.