

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues,
Fourth Session, May 16-27 2005, New York, USA.

Oral intervention by: Ms Atina Gangmei, of the Rongmei Luc Phuum (RLP),
South East Himalaya Region.

Item 3: Goal 1 of the Millennium Development Goals:
"Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger".

Madam Chairperson, distinguish Members of the Permanent Forum, Member States,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

There are many Naga women organizations within the Naga Nation, and the **Rongmei Luc Phuum (RLP)**, or the Rongmei Women Organization is one of its kinds for which, I am representing here today in this important session.

Poverty and hunger in our society is not a strange thing; it is a social concern for us as much as it is with other indigenous communities. In a country where millions of people lived under below poverty line, indigenous peoples in South East Himalaya (North East India) are the worst sufferers. Self-sufficiency and economic prosperity is a distant dream for most indigenous peoples of North East India.

In India assessment conducted reveal in some states that 80 per cent of indigenous and tribal families lived below the poverty line while in some other states their percentage exceed even 90 per cent. Therefore it is apparent that the bulk of the indigenous and tribal families live on the verge of starvation. The root causes for this situation is discrimination and disregard for rights of the indigenous peoples.

The development of the South East Himalaya has been characterized by discrimination; exclusion, expropriation and deprivation in terms of development and basic infrastructures. Where the only development initiatives have been taken, these have been in the service of industry, for establishment of military strategic objectives or for the so-called national good rather than towards the progress of indigenous communities nor have these been in line with indigenous norms, values, traditions and aspirations. Many of the national development projects, such as construction of dams, mining, deforestation etc. have created irreparable damage to the indigenous people's lives and land. This has led to increase in the poverty level among the indigenous peoples. The proposal for many more hydroelectric dam projects are in the waiting list in the indigenous peoples' land of the South East Himalaya. The Tipaimukh 161 metres High Dam Project in the territory of the Nagas in Manipur is one of such project, which has been planned and approved by the Indian Government without the free prior and informed consent of the indigenous people, which will bring another devastation to the indigenous peoples resulting in the **permanent lost of their land, displacement of indigenous population** and breed **numerous socio-economic problems and health hazard**.

Another main issue that hinders economic prosperity and causes poverty is the absence of peaceful atmosphere in the society. The South East Himalaya states is one such place suffering under military occupation and militarization. Indigenous people of the region are living under the constant stress of armed conflict and inter-ethnic clashes. Without peace there can be no development. People living under the peace torn society naturally become the victim of poverty.

As a Naga lady I want to particularize the issue of Naga politics. Basing on the inherent uniqueness of the Naga political history, the Nagas, who have been asserting their rights for self-determination for more than 5 decades, have entered into a peace dialogue with the government of India since 1997, and series of peace talk is going on.

Therefore, I appeal to the Permanent Forum to impress upon the Government of India and the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) under the collective leadership to amicably solve the Naga political issue through the ongoing political negotiation between the Government of India (GoI) and the NSCN, so as to bring about peace and political settlement in the region. Solving the Naga political issue would not only benefit the Nagas but it will encourage other resistance organizations of oppressed indigenous peoples in the South East Himalaya region to enter into peace dialogue with the GoI.

Furthermore, we would like to make the following recommendations to the Permanent Forum for considerations;

1. To urge the States to remove economic strains and grant equal status with equal recognition of the indigenous people's rights and privileges to development irrespective of their number.
2. To urge the states to recognize right to identity and self-identification of indigenous peoples and the right to self determined development.
3. To consider measures to protect indigenous peoples from adverse impact of liberalization, privatization and globalization.
4. Consistent and inalienable ownership and management rights of indigenous people's natural resources must be recognized and protected through articulated and enforceable laws.
5. Eviction and forced relocation of indigenous and tribal peoples from their ancestral lands must be prevented. The policy must unequivocally and explicitly prohibit this under any circumstances without free prior and informed consent. Provisions for forced relocation and resettlement may pertain only to those exceptional situations, such as rescue operations due to natural disasters or armed conflict.
6. To urge the government of India to ensure the inclusion of indigenous issues in their efforts to achieve the MDGs particularly on the eradication of poverty.

Thank you, Madam Chairperson for your kind attention.