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Seventh Generation Fund / American Indian Law Alliance

Intervention to the Fourth Session of the  
United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues  
Submitted by Seventh Generation Fund - May 17, 2005

*Agenda Item #1, Millennium Development Goal #1*  
**Eradication of Extreme Poverty and Hunger**  
Protection of Water

Introduction:

Thank you, Madam Chair, for the opportunity of addressing the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Please allow me to congratulate your appointment as Chair, and extend my greetings to all the esteemed members of the Forum. My name is Tia Oros Peters and I am from the A:shiwí, the Zuni people. The Seventh Generation Fund, which is an Indigenous peoples' organization working directly with grassroots Native communities designing and implementing strategies for sovereignty, human rights, environmental justice, cultural revitalization, and sacred sites protection for Indigenous Nations, submits this intervention on Agenda Item #1, Millennium Development Goal #1, the Eradication of Extreme Poverty and Hunger, with the Zuni Pueblo-Zuni Tribal Council, American Indian Law Alliance, Tonatierra, Maya Vision, Owe Aku Tiospaye, Centre for Organisation Research and Education, South Asia Solidarity for Rivers and Peoples, and Indigenous Network on Economies and Trade.

Narrative:

We are here today because the water wars have begun on Indigenous territories. The onslaught of governmental and commercial exploitation and commodification of water, which is the sacred essence of all life, has direct and tremendously destructive impacts on Indigenous peoples and further impoverishes our already vulnerable, besieged communities. Precious watersheds that give birth to our lakes and springs and enable life in our communities are under attack by extractive industries, among others. Privatization of water and other resources places them in the control of multi-national corporations, short-sighted governmental development policies, the unrelenting encroachment by non-indigenous settlements, and other assaults on our communities, forcing us into poverty and pushing us further to the edge of existence. Polluted by toxins, dammed and diverted, the vital rivers and streams which nurture us and have assured our survival since the beginning of time, are being killed by insatiable greed.

Indigenous peoples have never considered water as a commodity, but as a sacred source of life. Commodification of water obstructs critically needed access to our water and threatens the survival of our peoples and continuity of our distinct cultures. Madam Chair, as Indigenous peoples continue fighting on this battlefield for our rights to water, we are in fact, dying of thirst, for healthy, accessible water. Although North America is widely assumed to be a region of universal affluence, there are countless underlying pockets of extreme poverty and hunger among thousands of Indigenous peoples who have no meaningful system of protection against the exploitation of our resources.

For countless generations in the high desert region where rain is very rare and the land is constantly thirsty, the Zuni River flowed through the village sustaining the Zuni/A:shiwí people, our rich agrarian lifeway, and the high desert landscape of our ancestors' emergence. This sacred

waterway is an umbilical cord for my people, a conduit linking us with our spiritual destiny, carrying prayers and offerings to Zuni Heaven, our final everlasting place.

The Zuni River was dammed and diverted by the Ramah Cattle Company, empowering Mormon missionary settlements upstream. The actions have strangled the flow of the river initiating the river's struggle for survival. And with the demise of the river has come the beginning of a downward spiral of the nutritional health of Zuni people and threat to our culture. 1982 was the last time the river flowed through the village since the Ramah Dam was built. The precious waterway on which the community has relied for centuries, died in its sleep as some vulnerable children do, a Sudden Infant Death, leaving us with shock and anguish. A dead dry riverbed remains where the river once flowed. What was once a rich landscape awake with gardens, wheat and cornfields, is a parched land that only tears can soften today.

And, the Klamath River has provided sustenance for the Yurok, Hupa, and Karuk peoples since time immemorial. This river connects to the Pacific Ocean and supports a rich ecosystem composed of forests, animals and fish particularly salmon, a sacred relative, staple food among the people of this forest territory, providing a spiritual and nutritional source of energy.

Over 35,000 spawning salmon died in our territories during the summer of 2002, washing ashore belly up, their bodies covered with sores, mouths gaping open from suffocation, eyes bulging from struggle. Their Klamath River home, once a free flowing and vibrant waterway, has been diverted by federal agencies to irrigate non-indigenous agricultural fields hundreds of miles away, reducing the flow to less than 30% of its original volume. This has caused a shift of sweet water to bitter, depleting oxygen in the water, and fostering the perfect breeding grounds for fatal bacterial diseases. The lifecycle of the salmon has been critically altered. There will be no young salmon returning to spawn, no staple food for the people. The assault on the Klamath River is the 911 event for the Indigenous people of that region.

Tens of thousands of Indigenous Peoples in North America suffer extreme poverty and hunger. And millions more the in far reaches of the Indigenous world, including the critical situation for the roughly 30 million Indigenous peoples of 250 different tribal communities of the Prahmaputra Barak valleys of the North East region of India.

#### **Recommendations:**

1. Our first, urgent recommendation to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is to request the immediate appointment of a United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Protection of Water to gather testimony directly from Indigenous communities of the world impacted by or targeted for the water privatization, diversion, toxic contamination, pollution, commodification and other environmental injustices that damage natural and potable water supplies on which Indigenous peoples rely for spiritual and nutritional sustenance. The Rapporteur should critically review and assess water allocation and access policies and regulations that affect the rights of Indigenous communities, the health of our peoples and future generations. Such testimony can inform the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in developing its recommendations to ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council of the UN). This should be done with a view to identifying protective

and preventive mechanisms to restore our waters as well as repair our diverse ecosystems that rely on the health of natural water flows.

2. We call upon the Permanent Forum to advocate for full access in order to actively engage with the upcoming World Water Forum in Mexico City in 2006, to assure the full participation of Indigenous peoples, the inclusion of our rights to and perspectives on water in that conference.
3. Finally, Madam Chair, we further recommend that the Permanent Forum take immediate steps in the Commission on Sustainable Development to protect water from privatization, and from bi-lateral and multi-lateral governmental agreements and other incursions that affect the integrity of our waters, in the impoverish our communities, and impose additional hardships on our peoples, particularly on Indigenous women.

In closing, Madam Chair, we are thirsty and now we drink water laced with polychlorinated biphenyls (pcb's) and cyanide not out of choice, but because we are thirsty and a polluted stream is our only source of water. We no longer plant our gardens, not because we are lazy or have forgotten how to nurture life from a seed, but because without access to water, our crops will not flourish, and we cannot thrive without them. Children eat fish contaminated with mercury poisoning not because we want to harm their health, but because they are hungry and fish is a staple food for many of our communities. And some of us have no fish at all.

Water is not merely a need for us. It is a right. Governments, corporations, missionaries, and other invaders on our lands have declared a water war against us. Our children, those generations yet to be born, and all of our relations, are the ultimate casualties of this conflict.

E:lah:kwa - Thank you for your kind attention.