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Statement to UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Manuel Rodriguez-Becerra, Chairman of the UN Forum on Forests

11:00 am, Wednesday 18 May 2005, Conference Room 2

I am very happy and honored to join you this morning. As you know, there is a tremendous amount of over-lap in the goals and visions of both the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the UN Forum on Forests and it is only fitting that we continue to strengthen our mutual inter-change of ideas and experience. I was particularly pleased to welcome your Chairperson, Ms. Tauli-Corpuz to our Forum yesterday. Her discussion of the integral role of Indigenous People in sustainable forest management as well as the need to ensure respect for land tenure, human rights, and the free, prior and informed consent to policies that affect them was a very welcome reminder of the key issues that affect Indigenous People the most.

I would like to start out this morning with a very brief introduction to the UN Forum on Forests, and in so doing highlight some of the similarities and differences between the ways in which our Forums work. I know that you have decided to take the Millennium Development Goals as your major theme for the session, and I will spend some time discussing the very important linkages between Indigenous Peoples, MDGs, and preserving and restoring the world's forests. I will also share with you developments in the UN Forum on Forests, especially as we grapple with deciding the way forward.

The UN Forum on Forests was created by the UN Economic and Social Council in October of 2000 as the culmination of a very long process of inter-governmental deliberations started at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Although both of our Forums share similar titles, their composition and rules of procedure are quite different. As I understand, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is composed of 16 elected individuals, eight of which are nominated by member states and the other eight coming from Indigenous People and serves as an expert advisory group for ECOSOC and all of its Functional Commissions. Our Forum functions under the rules of procedure of a Functional Commission, yet while a Functional Commission is composed of a select

number of member states, the UNFF is composed of all 191 member states of the United Nations. I understand that you depend heavily on an inter-agency advisory group that works with you to implement resolutions. We too benefit from a group of inter-governmental and international organizations dedicated to implementation, known collectively as the Collaborative Partnership on Forests. In addition, we look to a wide variety of civil society organizations, categorized into nine Major Groups, for a sharing of advice and experience, of which Indigenous People is one.

The UN Forum on Forests maintains as its primary objective, the management, protection and sustainable development of all types of forests and the strengthening of long-term political commitment to that end. As such, the relevance of the MDGs to forest policy and the potential contribution of forest resources to the accomplishment of the MDGs is of great importance to us.

The World Bank estimates that roughly a quarter of the world's poor and 90 percent of the poorest depend substantially on forests for their livelihoods. More than 400 million forest-dependant people live in or near dense forests and rely heavily on forests for subsistence and income; this includes an estimated 60 million Indigenous People who are almost entirely dependent on forests. These forest-dependant Indigenous People are among the poorest, most vulnerable and powerless groups. Typically, subsistence is based on forest-fallow shifting cultivation systems, gathering of wild plants, hunting, and use of forest vegetation for grazing livestock. Even this basic level of subsistence is threatened where tenure rights are insecure, where forest laws deny or limit the right to use wood and non timber forest products or where rights of access and residence are denied. These people often live in politically marginalized groups distinct from the dominant culture. Many of these Indigenous People belong to the "other half": those who will remain in poverty and face hunger even after the MDG targets are met. Moreover, while forest products may help them cope with poverty, they do not necessarily help them to escape from poverty; the challenge is to maintain the safety net that forests provide, while creating new opportunities for the future.

Governments worldwide are beginning to recognize ancestral domain claims and customary rights of forest-dependent and Indigenous People. In many countries legal reforms have strengthened community forest tenure or created new opportunities for community management; the establishment of rights for Indigenous People and communities will dramatically improve the livelihoods of millions of forest inhabitants and contribute substantially to the achievement of the MDG Goal 1 -- alleviation of poverty -- as well as MDG Goal 7 -- Environmental Sustainability.

The international community has also made a number of agreements related to this issue. As you know, the Convention on Biological Diversity devotes a substantial amount of time and energy in discussion of Article 8(j) on Traditional Forest Related Knowledge. Since the Rio Earth Summit, governments have also created a number of Proposals for Action to promote and ensure sustainable forest management. The UNFF was created to promote and contribute to these proposals for action.

Although many of the proposals for action take up the issue of land tenure as well as traditional forest related knowledge, ensuring implementation has been a challenge. According to country case studies prepared by Indigenous People for a recently organized Expert Meeting on Implementation of International Agreements on Traditional Forest Related Knowledge, Indigenous People still encounter challenges in gaining formal recognition, land tenure and access rights. When Indigenous Peoples are removed from their native lands, their ability to maintain and pass-on traditional knowledge is hindered and put at risk of being lost.

Most members of the UN Forum on Forests agree that more political will must be harnessed in order for international agreements to be implemented on the scale necessary to stop the alarming rate of deforestation the world is witnessing today. The question is how best to do this.

The members of the Forum have spent the last year discussing and outlining various options. Members have stated at various meetings that actions to strengthen the

international arrangement could include: building a strong financial element; identifying and addressing priorities, emerging and critical issues; adopting a global goal for forests; agreeing voluntary guidelines on sustainable forest management; improving methods of work; and developing regional and cross-sectoral collaboration. This can be done either through the strengthening of the existing arrangement or through the creation of a legally binding instrument.

As you know, we just started our fifth session on Monday and will be discussing exactly these issues for the next two weeks. Governments will decide on whether or not to create a legally binding instrument on forests or to find ways of strengthening the current arrangement so as to enhance implementation. In either case, the needs and priorities of Indigenous People will surely be on the agenda. I know that some of your members have also been very active in contributing substantively to our discussions and that two of your members will be participating in the Ministerial High-Level Segment we have planned for next week. We welcome and look forward to continuing our mutual dialogue to ensure that the appropriate priorities are set to accomplish the Goals set out by the Millennium Declaration.

I thank you for your time.