

Decade of Indigenous Peoples recognized by United Nations

by Tricia King

Special to the *Tundra Times*

For at least ten years, through the end of 2004, international governments are pledging to give increased attention to the concerns of indigenous peoples worldwide. The International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples, launched by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1994, gives official status to goals of strengthening international cooperation in resolving problems faced by indigenous peoples. Human rights, self-determination, improved

living conditions and health, environmentally sound development, and realistic partnerships of indigenous peoples in international actions will be among the topics of increased focus during the Decade.

"It should be emphasized that, among the peoples of the earth, indigenous people constitute a vulnerable group which has long been neglected," said Amara Essy, UN General Assembly president, opening the observance of the Decade in December. "Their social structures and lifestyles have suffered the repercus-

Page 4, please

Decade . . .

Continued from page 1

sions of modern development. They have been subject to growing pressure to bring their languages, religions, knowledges, arts and oral traditions, and the other manifestations of their ways of life, into conformity with those of the majority social groups around them. However, despite all these difficulties, it must be recognized that the world's indigenous people are not prepared to accept silently, the erosion of their cultures."

The international dialogue regarding indigenous issues during 1993, which was given the designation of International Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples by the UN, pointed up the need to go beyond a symbolic gesture and designate a greater period of time for more in-depth work on global indigenous concerns, Essy said.

But according to Native leaders actively engaged in lobbying for international recognition, the new international attention has not been won without a struggle.

"It was not increased government awareness that led to the declaration of the decade, but rather action and campaigns by the indigenous peoples themselves. Governments are not interested, and this must be acknowledged," said Rigoberto Menchu Tum of Guatemala.

August 9, the anniversary of the first meeting of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, will be celebrated as an International Day of Indigenous People each year during the Decade. That day marks the beginning of the recognition of indigenous people and their struggle for recognition by the United Nations system. Alaska Native are encouraged to share details of any special activities planned for August 9 with *Tundra Times* readers.

The International Indian Treaty Council is bringing UN technical expert Dr. Miguel Alfonso Martinez to Palmer in June, to hear the concerns of Alaska Native peoples. The results of Martinez' research into treaties and other agreements between indigenous peoples and governments worldwide will be presented to the United Nations in 1996.

"I think it's very important that a United Nations official is coming to meet with Alaska Native people. That's the only reason he's coming," said Andrea Carmen of Palmer, IITC Executive Director. Carmen urges people from all Alaskan tribes to avail themselves of the opportunity to speak to the UN official. The testimony will be taken as part of international conferences hosted by the IITC and Indigenous Environmental Network during the week of June 19-25 at the Elks' Youth Campground near Palmer.

A more detailed report on the activities planned for the two conferences, which are free to anyone who wants to attend, will be published in the next issue of the *Tundra Times*. In the meantime, further details may be obtained by calling (907) 745-0505 or (907) 745-4482.