

Forum for Indigenous Issues

The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) adopted, on 31 July 2000, a resolution to establish a Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues – seen as an unprecedented event in the international community. This was the latest step in a long process initiated in 1993, when the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights first proposed such a forum.

Indigenous people have struggled for a long time to make their concerns heard by governments, the United Nations and other intergovernmental bodies. However,

their circumstances and needs went largely unnoticed by the international community until the publication of the landmark study undertaken by the UN Subcommission on the Protection of Minorities and Prevention of Discrimination in the 1970s. The Study, prepared by the Special Rapporteur, José Martínez Cobo of Ecuador, led directly to the establishment of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, which met for the first time on 9 August 1982.

During its 18 years of existence, the Working Group

has completed several studies – *inter alia*, on the relationship of indigenous peoples to land, on treaties and agreements, and on the protection of the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples. The Working Group has consistently reported that indigenous peoples around the world continue to be among the most marginalised and impoverished, and that their ways of life, cultural heritage and languages continue to be threatened. At the same time, the various world conferences of recent years have repeatedly validated the contribution of indigenous societies, particularly regarding sustainable development and the protection of the Earth's biodiversity.

came the decision as a “historic step forward.” “The Permanent Forum,” she said, “promises to give indigenous peoples a unique voice within the United Nations system, commensurate with the unique problems which many indigenous people still face, but also with the unique contribution they make to the human rights dialogue, at the local, national and international levels.”

Indigenous representatives, not simply representatives of Member States will, for the first time, participate in a high-level forum in the United Nations system. The Forum will be a subsidiary organ of the Economic and Social Council and will consist of 16 representatives. Eight



Pristine waters: Seventeenth century European explorers make contact with native Americans on the banks of the Hudson river

When the United Nations General Assembly adopted the programme of activities for the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995–2004), it identified the establishment of the Forum as one of the main objectives of the Decade. The General Assembly also called for the International Day of the World's Indigenous People to be observed annually on 9 August, as part of the Decade.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, Coordinator of the International Decade, wel-

members are to be nominated by governments and elected by the Council, and eight are to be appointed by the President of the Council following broad consultations with indigenous organisations and groups. The selection process is to take into account principles of representation and the diversity and geographical distribution of indigenous peoples. Organisations of indigenous people may participate in the Forum as observers, as may States, United Nations bodies and organs, and intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations. (MJ) 