

UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES
REPORT – 16-27 MAY 2005

General

I departed Mount Isa on Thursday 12 May 2005. Remained overnight Sydney, met with Lynette Riley-Mundine at Sydney airport Friday morning departing at 10.50 am for Los Angeles and New York.

Processing through Immigration at Los Angeles took approximately 15 minutes instead the usual 2 to 3 minutes. The Immigration Officer asked me on three occasions if I had a “weisa”. I advised her that I did not have a visa as Australians did not need to have a visa to visit USA. She then studied her computer screen and asked if I was a citizen of London England. I told her I was an Australian citizen. She followed this procedure for quite some time asking me on a further two occasions if I had a “weisa” and if I was a citizen of London England. I gave her the same answer again each time, reminding her that I have visited the USA in 2002, 2003 and 2004 for the very same reason that I was here on this occasion, to attend the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York. She then asked if I had a business card. I produced my NATSIEC Card. She asked if she could keep a copy, to which I replied ‘yes’. She then told me I was free to proceed through to customs. Thank you for the card. The NATSIEC Card obviously has some powerful vibes.

On arrival at New York Lynette and I shared a cab with Les Malezer to Manhattan. The duty manager of the Bedford Hotel told us that we did not have a booking and when asked if we could talk with Bishop Eugenio Poma, he told us that Bishop Poma was not booked in either. We obtained accommodation at another hotel 2 or 3 blocks away, paid for by Lynette using her Credit Card.

On Saturday morning we attended the Indigenous Peoples Caucus meeting in the church building opposite the United Nations, where we met with Bishop Poma. He told us that we were in fact booked into the Bedford Hotel and that he was there on Friday night at the time of our arrival. Bishop Poma discussed our predicament with the hotel manager. I do not have a clear understanding of what it was that caused this misunderstanding. I have my suspicions which I will explain when I report personally to the NATSIEC Commissioners.

We had one more person in the hotel suite with us than originally planned. Because we had one female representative, viz., Lynette, in the suite, the arrival of this extra person helped to complicate the sleeping arrangements initially, but this was sorted out to everyone’s relief.

Millennium Goals

The two major matters for consideration at this forum were :-

Goal 1 of the Millennium Development Goals: “Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger”

Goal 2 of the Millennium Development Goals: “Achieve universal primary education”

Interventions

My intervention on the Eradication of extreme poverty was not accepted as the closing time for acceptance was not made public (to my knowledge) until I took my paper to the administrators for inclusion. However I have attached a copy of my intervention for your information.

My intervention on Education was accepted with a very quick change of heading from Human Rights to Education at the last minute when my name was called out for Education, rather than Human Rights. Bishop Poma had asked me to use a WCC paper “Human Rights and Languages of Indigenous Peoples” as the basis for my intervention. This was presented to the forum.

Lynette and I also took an active part in the “Pacific Caucus” meetings each morning prior to moving into the UN meeting and made joint interventions with other Pacific Caucus members and their organizations on the millennium goals.

This sharing of information and reaching consensus on many of the matters of concern to the Pacific Region was a very positive experience, which helped to develop a close bond between each of the representatives.

I met with the representative from Armenia on completion of her intervention. She was quite emotional and was grateful to have someone to talk to about her concerns for her people.

She explained that the majority of Armenians are Christians and their community is being blockaded by Turkey and Azerbaidzhan with the intention of forcing them to convert to Islam. She asked for help from Australia and the World Council of Churches to have Armenia recognized by all other countries.

Oil is Azerbaidzhan’s chief source of wealth so “great and powerful nations” may be reluctant to put too much pressure on them. Armenia’s chief industry is farming, with some other industries being introduced in more recent years. Consequently they may not be considered so important on the world stage as those countries which are rich in oil.

Armenian language is not closely related to any other language in the world. They have been Christians since AD301 and form part of the Eastern Orthodox Churches. Because of the pressure on them to convert to Islam they desperately seek the help of other Christian nations and organizations such as the World Council of Churches.

Side Events

There were a number of Side Events; presentations which were made during the lunch break and of an evening. I attended three of these. One was "*The Legacy of Fifteenth Century Vatican Papal Bulls and Indigenous Nations and Peoples*" which explained the effect that this had in developing the negative attitude of the colonizing powers towards Indigenous Peoples.

Another event was presented by Lynette Riley-Mundine on Education in New South Wales Schools. This was very informative and well received by those present. Some of the points Lynette raised indicated a difference in the claims made by the Australian Government spokesperson regarding Indigenous education. This was a matter for some interesting discussion.

The other Side Event which I attended was "The Rights of the Child". Latin American representatives present were very vocal and felt quite passionate about this matter. The meeting was to try to form a committee to coordinate our activities and to support one another in achieving our goals. I advised the facilitators that I would be willing to help where possible, and that I was willing to be a contact person but chose not to become a committee member at that time. I expect that there will be email contacts during the year.

On the week following the forum I took an active part in a presentation by Fr. Kevin Dance, an Australian member of the Religious Order of Passionists to educationalists from various countries around the globe. This was very well received and helped to improve their knowledge of Australia and the problems facing Indigenous Australians. Fr. Dance is also the Deputy Chairperson of the NGOs to the United Nations.

Planning

Bishop Poma said that the WCC has planned for a preparatory meeting in Geneva from 07 to 10 August 2005 prior to the 9th WCC Assembly in Brazil in February 2006. He has asked for Australian representation at both events. He will no doubt be in touch with NATSIEC regards these two meetings.

Conclusion

I wish to thank the Commissioners for once again allowing me the privilege of representing NATSIEC and the World Council of Churches. I will be pleased to provide any further information on relevant issues at the next Commissioners meeting.

Peter Smith
Australian Representative for World Council of Churches
United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

05 July 2005