

UNITED NATIONS



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**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**

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**MESSAGE ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY  
OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE**

**9 August 2008**

In 1994, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 9 August as the International Day of the World's Indigenous People. There were many reasons for this decision, but the fundamental motivation was the Assembly's recognition of the need to place the United Nations clearly and strongly behind the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous peoples, in order to put an end to their marginalization, their extreme poverty, the expropriation of their traditional lands and the other grave human rights abuses they have faced and continue to encounter. Indeed, the suffering of indigenous peoples includes some of the darkest episodes in human history.

Important as it was, proclamation of the day was only a prelude to a greater milestone: last fall's adoption by the General Assembly of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration is a visionary step towards addressing the human rights of indigenous peoples. It sets out a framework on which states can build or re-build their relationships with indigenous peoples. The result of more than two decades of negotiations, it provides a momentous opportunity for states and indigenous peoples to strengthen their relationships, promote reconciliation, and ensure that the past is not repeated. I encourage Member States and indigenous peoples to come together in a spirit of mutual respect, and make use of the Declaration as the living document it is so that it has a real and positive effect throughout the world.

As 2008 is the International Year of Languages, this International Day is also an opportunity to recognize the silent crisis confronting many of the world's languages, the overwhelming majority of which are indigenous peoples' languages. The loss of these languages would not only weaken the world's cultural diversity, but also our collective knowledge as a human race. I call on States, indigenous peoples, the UN system and all relevant actors to take immediate steps to protect and promote endangered languages, and to ensure the safe passage of this shared heritage to future generations.