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Sexual Violence Against Indigenous Women Discussed at United Nations

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Photo courtesy United Nations/Ryan Brown – A group of indigenous women discussed Amnesty International’s recent report at a panel called “Violence Against Indigenous Women” at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues May 14, the opening day of the forum’s sixth session in New York. (Bottom photo) The sixth session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at the United Nations headquarters in New York opened May 14 and a focus panel on “Violence Against Indigenous Women” looked at rising rates of sexual violence against Native women.

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NEW YORK – In Mexico, Ines Fernandez Ortega, a 27-year-old woman, was preparing food in her kitchen when a group of soldiers entered her house and raped her. A local police investigation ground to a halt when military authorities claimed jurisdiction over the case.

In Canada, Helen Betty Osborne, a 19-year-old Cree student from northern Manitoba, was abducted by four white men, sexually assaulted and brutally murdered. A provincial inquiry later – much later – criticized the sloppy and racially biased police investigation that took 15 years to bring one of the men to justice.

In Guatemala, Maria Isabel, a 15-year-old girl, was kidnapped and later found murdered. She had been raped, feet and hands bound with barbed wire, stabbed, strangled and stuffed into a bag. She was one of 1,188 women killed between 2001 and 2004, according to an Amnesty International report.

In America, an American Indian woman was raped, beaten and thrown from a bridge by two white men. Miraculously, the woman survived and pressed charges against her attackers but, when the case first went to trial, jurors couldn't agree on a verdict. When asked why, one juror said, "She was just another drunk Indian."

These examples, documented in studies by AI, are the tip of the iceberg of a worldwide scourge of sexual violence against indigenous women. A group of indigenous women discussed the issues at a panel called "Violence Against Indigenous Women" at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues May 14, the opening day of the forum's sixth session.

"This most common human right abuse affects between 20 and 50 percent of all women of most countries for all culture and classes and, even though we've achieved much in the last two decades, this pernicious problem continues amongst us and even shows evidence of increasing in some societies," said Marijke Velzeboer-Salcedo, the regional director for the Americas of United Nations Development Fund for Women and moderator of the panel.

A major report called "Indigenous Women Stand Against Violence" was recently published. It was a companion report to the U.N.'s secretary general's study on violence against women prepared by the International Indigenous Women's Forum, which is known by its Spanish acronym FIMI (Foro Internacional de Mujeres Indigenas). The full report and its recommendations, and strategies for eradicating violence against indigenous women, are available at www.indigenouswomensforum.org/resources.html.

Michael Bochenek, AI's director of international policy, said AI has gained prominence since its 2004 violence against women campaign which calls for dismantling barriers to access justice, providing adequate health services to women and exposing the failure of states to act with due diligence in cases of violence against women.

Mililani Trask from the Indigenous World Association cited a recent report by the U.N.'s special rapporteur on human rights that talks about a trend by the dominant culture to justify certain acts of violence against women as cultural traditions and practices that are to be protected.

"We have seen this more and more developing over the last several years; deliberate effort on the part of the Bush administration and certain other states that are standing with the Bush administration as allies to achieve what the special rapporteur is calling 'the orientaling of violence against women,'" Trask said. This is where sexual violence and racism interact, Trask continued.

"By focusing the issue on cultural traditions, the developed Western countries can both demonize certain countries and free themselves from addressing the expanding violence against women," Trask added.

Beverly Jacobs, a Mohawk woman from Six Nations Grand River territory and the president of the Native Women's Association of Canada, said the well-being of communities depends on the well-being of women.

“Where I come from is a matriarchal, matrilineal society where the women in our communities are the backbone of our communities and when we have healthy women we have healthy nations and healthy communities. I think it's a very critical situation that we're in right now. Women in our societies are saying, ‘That's enough, that's enough, that's it and what are we going to do about it?’” Jacobs said.

The groups began lobbying four years ago to address the issues of racialized sexual violence after a number of indigenous women were brutally murdered and mutilated.

“All of the stereotypes exist out there, saying that this is part of our culture and our tradition. I can tell you it's not part of my culture and my tradition. Where I come from there is no word for sexual violence, there is no word for sexual assault, so it has to be a created word to understand what it is. It's something we need to think about and know this is occurring across the world,” Jacobs added.

Organizations sponsor panels at United Nations forum. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, an advisory body to the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council, is mandated to discuss indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. Dozens of nongovernmental organizations hosted “side events” at the forum's sixth session, held at the United Nations in New York May 14 -25. The following groups sponsored panels on violence against indigenous women and climate change. The following information and resources are found at each group's Web site:

- Seventh Generation Fund, www.7genfund.org, based in Arcata, Calif., is an indigenous nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and maintaining the uniqueness of Native peoples throughout the Americas. The organization offers an integrated program of advocacy, small grants, training and technical assistance, media experience and fiscal management, lending support and extensive expertise to indigenous grass-roots communities. The Seventh Generation Fund derives its name from a precept of the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy) that mandates that chiefs consider the impact of their decisions on the seventh generation yet to come. The organization has set up a special media center on its Web site to provide coverage of the permanent forum's sixth session in live interviews, videos, audios and photos of people and events taking place each day. The content will remain on the Web site for several months.
- The American Indian Law Alliance, www.ailanyc.org, founded in 1989 by Tonya Gonnella Frichner, Onondaga Nation, is an indigenous, nonprofit organization that works with indigenous nations, communities and organizations in their struggle for sovereignty, human rights and social justice, both in the United States and internationally. Frichner was recently appointed the North American representative to the UNPFII. AILA has consultative status with the U.N.'s

Economic and Social Council. From AILA's Web site: "We support our elders and leaders and are accountable to the communities we serve. We welcome our allies, while remaining committed to our original instructions handed down through generations of ancestors in order to preserve Indigenous traditions for our descendants."

- Indigenous Networks on Economies and Trade, www.indigenousnet.org, based in Vancouver, British Columbia, is a network open to indigenous peoples and organizations from around the globe who want to defend and develop their inherent rights to their territories and indigenous economies.
- International Indigenous Women's Forum (known by its Spanish acronym, FIMI), www.indigenouswomensforum.org, is a network of indigenous women leaders from Asia, Africa and the Americas. FIMI's mission is to bring together indigenous women activists, leaders and human rights promoters from different parts of the world to coordinate agendas, build unity, develop leadership and advocacy skills, increase indigenous women's roles in international decision-making processes and advance women's human rights. FIMI's recent report on violence against indigenous women – "Mairin Iwanka Raya: Indigenous Women Stand Against Violence" – is available in English and Spanish on its Web site.
- MADRE, www.madre.org, based in New York, is an international women's human rights organization, founded in 1983, that works in partnership with community-based women's organizations worldwide to address health and reproductive rights, economic development, education and other human rights issues. MADRE provides resources, training and support to enable its sister organizations to meet concrete needs in their communities while working to shift the balance of power to promote long-term development and social justice. Since its founding, MADRE has delivered more than \$22 million in support to community-based women's organizations in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, the Balkans and the United States. MADRE is a direct-action human rights organization that not only documents and condemns abuses, but also works directly with women who are affected by violations to help them win justice and change the conditions that give rise to human rights abuses. ! MADRE also challenges U.S. policies that undermine human rights.

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