

Opening

Tone Bleie, Chair, Forum for Development Cooperation with Indigenous Peoples

I'd like to extend a warm welcome to our dear participants of the 10th annual Forum for Development Cooperation with Indigenous Peoples Conference here at the University of Tromsø.

This year's conference has a focus on violent conflicts and their trajectories in ceasefires, in peace accords—and beyond—when the guns have silenced. Peace accords are preceded by the often very difficult road to implementation, which often includes disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR), resettlement of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), reconciliation and development efforts. All processes like these are interdependent and their positive reinforcement or inherent contradictions are of critical importance for whether a peace process falters—with a possible lapse into hostilities—or a peace process gains strength and becomes enduring.

This conference addresses these themes through the lens of indigenous peoples. Indigenous societies have throughout pre-history and history often preferred peaceful means of mediation and defence—or withdrawal into less accessible territories—rather than using violent means when seeking active encounters with intruders, invaders and oppressors. The current responses of indigenous women, men, and children cover a whole spectrum of non-violent and violent means of resistance and pre-emptive action. The spectrum of non-violent means include civil disobedience and the increasing use of international and national law, not least of which is the growing collective body of indigenous rights. Some of our guests and speakers at the conference include outstandingly brave indigenous civil society leaders and civil servants who engage in peaceful ways with the state, non-state actors and the affected communities.

The modern historical era of colonial and post-colonial industrial and post-industrial expansionism is characterised by massive encroachment into indigenous lands and territories and mass violence and death, including genocide. Occupations were accompanied by the overthrow, collapse or cooption of indigenous governance institutions. Colonial policies were divisive and often pitted groups against one another—some were given privileged access to the colonial state at the expense of others. State borders were arbitrarily drawn and brought mass migration, mostly of an involuntary nature. The new nation-states following the colonial period have often perpetuated or even reinforced discriminatory policies and state institutions and dismissed justified claims for recognition and self-determination, paving the way for militant actions. The circulation of small arms adds a new lethal force to many conflicts. These are some of the factors that form the background for today's world of strife over valuable and scarce natural resources and heavy militarization in indigenous territories and lands engendering violent conflicts. Some of them are among the world's most long-lasting (the Naga movement in North East India) conflicts and involve both state and non-state indigenous groups and different indigenous-led militant groups or fractions.

Since the 1990s, the international and global security and humanitarian focus has increasingly been selective on some (sub)regional conflicts in Central Asia, West-Africa, Central Africa and the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East, and the so-called War on Terror has, in many respects, reinforced a selective security focus. The increasing role of the UN in peacekeeping operations has implied a large number of combined UN-operations, which are often characterised by rapid interventionism, wherein Reintegration is “the step-child” of the two. Many low intensity conflicts (state-based— where the government is one of the warring parties) and non-state conflicts (between ethnic groups or indigenous groups) are hardly known to us policy-makers, researchers, or leaders of Sámi and other indigenous organisations.

The media coverage of the mass displacement of Santals in 1996 in the North-Eastern Indian State of Assam has been scant. Of the 250,000 Santals originally displaced, many of them remain displaced today. There is hardly any attention given to the fact that the Chittagong Hill Treaty has its 12th anniversary this December and remains unimplemented (it was signed between the erstwhile government of Sheikh Hasina who recently again became the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and the indigenous Jumma guerrilla group PCJSS). There is hardly any attention in our media paid to the Tuareg insurgency in Mali and Niger and that the indigenous ADC rebel group—long resistant to the 2006 Algiers Peace Agreement— finally signed a deal in August, also pledging support to counter-terrorism efforts against Al-Qaeda. While we have gotten massive media attention on the ethnic (Hutu-Tutsi) dimension of the extremely deadly and complicated sub-regional conflict in Democratic Republic of Congo, Zaire, Burundi and Rwanda – there is hardly any attention to the plight of the indigenous Twa—who were also victims of the 1994 genocide.

Why is our media so selective? Is the cynical truth that the mass media is too uncritically following the focus set by the internationally dominant political and military players? It is true enough that the governments are overzealous in restricting free media coverage and movements into non-peaceful areas and especially administered states, but there is currently almost always some information to act upon—given by local human rights groups with international outreach and by international indigenous-rights focused organizations.

This year, the Forum has chosen to highlight some of the many no-war, but still no peace, situations where indigenous rights continue to be violated. But we will also address the encouraging case of Guatemala, with its indigenous led-government—a situation the Forum has highlighted in a number of conferences. The situations highlighted in the main presentations cover three subthemes:

- the Santal-Bodo situation in Assam, India;
- former hunters & gatherers—pastoralist conflicts in the Tsumkwe Region, Namibia;
- hunters and gathers – pastoral conflicts elsewhere in Southern Africa and in Eastern Africa;
- the post-war situation in Guatemala;
- indigenous situations in Bangladesh;

- the Tuareg's situation in Mali and Niger;
- the Twa's situation in South-Kivu, DR of Congo.

I wish to conclude here and again wish you all a very warm welcome to two days of proceedings on some highly pressing and important indigenous rights agendas.