

**Statement by Dr. Ahmed Djoghlaf**

**Executive Secretary**

**Convention on Biological Diversity**

**OPENING PRESS CONFERENCE**

**For the**

**7<sup>th</sup> Session of the UNPFII**

**Theme: Climate change, bio-cultural diversity and livelihoods: the stewardship role of indigenous peoples and new challenges**

**UN Headquarters**

**New York**

**21 April, 2008.**

**1.15pm in room S-226.**

The Panelists for the press conference will be:

- Ms. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Chairperson of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues;
- Ms. Myrna Cunningham, Director of the Center for Indigenous People's Autonomy and Development of Nicaragua (CIPAD);
- Mr. Ahmed Djoghlaf, Executive Secretary of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity;
- Mr. Fiu Elisara, Executive Director of O le Siosiomaga Society Inc., Samoa.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the PRESS,

Last year my representative spoke to you to alert you to the human face of climate change – the World’s indigenous and local communities.

Today, I come before you to seek your help in taking the world community a step further in their understanding of the complex relationship between climate change, peoples, cultures and plants and animals.

I have the great honor of leading what I refer to as the Convention to Save Life of Earth – the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Indigenous and local communities are my partners (amongst others) in this monumental task.

Indeed the Parties to the Convention have taken extraordinary measures to ensure their effective participation in our work as we regard them both as rights holders and as essential helpers in our work, and they are crucial partners if we are to address the dramatic declines in plant and animal species around the world.

Research has shown that there are complex ties between biological diversity, cultural diversity, and traditional languages.

In fact, it is these interconnected diversities which provide the Earth and Humanity with our resilience – resilience is the strength needed to adjust to change and to survive.

However, this rich tapestry of diversity – and both the Earth and Humanities resilience - is impacted upon and accelerated by the crises of climate change.

Imagine a world without Diversity ...

Diversity – the rich tapestry of Life’s intricately interlaced phenomena, processes, and relationships— in all its wonderful forms - is being degraded by modern reductionist forces of homogenization, globalization, and more recently climate change.

Under relentless assault from various forces, the fabric of interdependent and mutually reinforcing strands of biological, cultural, and linguistic diversities has frayed, as our world has become increasingly brittle and less resilient. Sameness is increasing – diversity is decreasing. The colors on the tapestry of life are fading.

The anthropologist Earl Shorris said in 2000: “There are 9 different Maya words for the colour blue in the Porrua Spanish-Maya dictionary, but only 3 Spanish translations, leaving six butterflies that can only be seen by the Mayas, which proves that when a language dies, valuable information is lost and six butterflies disappear from the Earth’s consciousness.” .... not to mention the loss of 6 shades of the color blue.

I don’t need to be a clairvoyant to tell you that without urgent action - in the coming decades, these multiple crises will intensify — climate change will hasten ecosystem degradation and species loss; peak oil consumption and moves to coal may lead to an

even greater carbon footprint, and over-consumption, poverty, species loss, ecosystem and cultural decline will deepen, proposed solutions may only add to the problem - further precipitating possible systematic collapse.

Since becoming Executive Secretary of the Convention, I have spent countless hours pondering why biodiversity loss is not as well known to the general public as the issue of climate change, and what we need to do to raise the profile of biodiversity to ensure that our mission to slow the rate of extinctions is successful.

It is quite true to say that the general public in the developed world does not have a detailed knowledge of what biodiversity is and how it affects our daily lives. Surveys in Australia<sup>1</sup> and Japan have indicated that less than 7 per cent of the public have any real knowledge of the impact biodiversity loss has on human society.

However, in the developing world, where people rely more closely on nature for their immediate needs of food, shelter and medicine, they have a more intimate awareness of what biodiversity loss will mean for their daily lives – for instance in the developing world more than 80% of the population relies on traditional medicines (derived from plants and animals). Yet while climate change has managed to capture broad attention in both the developed and the developing worlds, biodiversity loss sadly has not.

Ultimately, hand in hand with rising global temperatures and extreme weather events, life on Earth and its ecosystems, which supply us with essential services (such as fresh air, water, food and medicine), are disappearing fast and will continue to do so unless urgent action is taken.

Last summer, the Arctic summer ice shrank to its smallest on record, eclipsing the previous 2005 record by more than 20 per cent according to U.S. satellite data dating back 30 years.

There are now 41,415 species on the IUCN Red List. Some 16,306 of them are threatened with extinction, up from 16,118 last year. In one human generation, the total number of extinct species has reached 785, with a further 65 only found in captivity or in cultivation. One in four mammals, one in eight birds, one third of all amphibians and 70 per cent of the world's assessed plants on the 2007 IUCN Red List are in jeopardy.<sup>2</sup>

We are living through the sixth crisis of the extinction of living species in the history of our planet, with the rate of extinction being accelerated by 100 times or more. Scientists are warning of a looming biodiversity extinction crisis, one that will rival or exceed the five historic mass extinctions that occurred millions of years ago. Unlike these past extinctions, which were variously the result of catastrophic climate change, extraterrestrial collisions, atmospheric poisoning, and hyperactive volcanism, the current

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<sup>1</sup> Refer <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/publications/review/chap5.html> and [http://www.google.com/search?sourceid=navclient&ie=UTF-8&rlz=1T4IBMA\\_en\\_CA208&q=public+awareness+of+biological+diversity+surveys+japan](http://www.google.com/search?sourceid=navclient&ie=UTF-8&rlz=1T4IBMA_en_CA208&q=public+awareness+of+biological+diversity+surveys+japan)

<sup>2</sup> IUCN Press Release 12 September 2007.

extinction event is one of our own making, fuelled mainly by habitat destruction (and in particular large scale conversion of habitat to agricultural lands – including mono-cropping and extractive industries) and, to a lesser extent, over-exploitation of certain species. Looking solely at species loss resulting from tropical deforestation, some researchers have forecast extinction rates in the foreseeable future as high as 75 per cent.

The impact of climate change on indigenous communities, their traditional knowledge and related biological diversity is of great concern to both the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity and the members of United Nations family.

There is little doubt that indigenous peoples, often among the World's most marginalized and impoverished peoples will bear the brunt of the catastrophe of climate change and as such provide a human face to the climate change crises.

The most advanced scientific research has concluded that changes in climate will gravely harm the health of their traditional lands and waters, their traditional knowledge and that many of plants and animals upon which they depend for survival will be threatened by the immediate impacts of climate change.

Indigenous peoples in particular regions and situations, such as the Arctic, small islands and high altitudes, low-lying lands and river deltas, semi-humid and arid lands, and especially pastoralists and semi-nomadic peoples, are experiencing accelerated climate change and should thus be considered highly vulnerable.

Such conclusions require urgent and unprecedented efforts and interventions from the global community. But I want to emphasize that such efforts should not simply see indigenous and local communities as the passive victims of climate change but valuable partners in the global efforts to address climate change.

Indigenous communities are already using their traditional knowledge to address and adapt to climate change at the local level.

Indigenous and local communities, with their vast amounts of traditional ecological knowledge, are sophisticated environmental managers and crucial partners that have a great deal to contribute in designing and implementing solutions to climate change. Adaptation and mitigation measures can be enhanced when they are informed by local traditional knowledge, innovations and practices.

If the Convention on biological Diversity is to achieve our ambitious target by 2010 to significantly reduce the loss of biodiversity, and especially in light of the climate change crises, we must fully recognize and value indigenous and local communities as custodians of the Earth's biodiversity and humanities cultural diversity. As diversity contains the potential for adaptation, there must be a global effort to work together, drawing on the unique knowledge of all the peoples of the world, with a special appreciation for the knowledge of indigenous peoples.

Our lives are inextricably linked with biodiversity and ultimately its protection is essential for our very survival. As the world begins to respond to the current crisis of

biodiversity loss, hand in hand with the human-induced catastrophe of climate change, the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity has a special role to play as a centre of excellence in international networking, information exchange and as an active and objective facilitator on inter-governmental decision-making processes and will be essential in assisting in the design and implementation of effective conservation strategies in partnership with Parties, Governments and indigenous and local communities – for the benefit of both peoples and nature.

Many times you will hear me say that the Convention is about saving Life on Earth – and I mean it. Should we not succeed life as we know it will perish. If climate change is not adequately addressed – we will inherit not only a warmer world but an empty world, devoid of color, life and diversity, and one unable to support human civilization and future generations.

The work being carried out by the Convention on Biological Diversity in the next two year period, provides an opportunity for the World's indigenous and local communities to help shape international commitments that will emerge, not just in the immediate future but in the years ahead - after the 2010 target.

To this end I want to encourage a partnership between the Convention and indigenous and local communities to celebrate the International Year of Biodiversity (in 2010) and to highlight their contributions to maintaining biodiversity and cultural diversity and in providing solutions to the climate change crises.

A great man once said "*The only real prediction you can make [is that] if worst happens, life will go on.*" — Alan Weisman

And he may be right in that Life may go on - but not humanity as we know it.

In finishes I want to emphasis that in change and crisis there is also opportunity - we must join hands and energies to ensure that the loss of biological diversity does not become a poor cousin to the issue of climate change.

Thank you.