

The Great Silence

The Indigenous Forum opened at the UN to the call of the conch and a blaze of colour – the Sami from areas around the Arctic in brilliant red and blue, feathered headdresses from the US and Mexico, bowler hats from the Andes, painted faces from the Amazon, multi-hued shawls and dresses but all, from the Arctic to the Amazon, burdened by racism and discrimination, grieving loss of culture and language and often powerless in the face of mining companies, loggers and plantation owners. Despite the colour and the call a Nepalese woman, representing Indigenous people with disabilities, spoke of the history of Indigenous people as “the great silence”.

At a very moving side event a small man from the Amazon, who had left his community deep in the forest in order to learn Portuguese so that he could protect and lead his people. He talked of dispossession, of fear for his children and most of all about the trees, the rivers, the air, their “life” now completely changed because of climate change. He said they no longer celebrate their big festivals for summer and winter because the climate is so altered. The capitalist world, he said, “does not see us as protectors of the forest but as problems.” At the end of his talk he invited us to stand and hold hands while he sang a song of creation and blessing. Another Amazonian spoke of the pain of sending their children to school in the towns and how his community ultimately withdrew the children because a teacher said to a little boy “Why have you got your face painted like that – it is so ugly.” Now he said, “our children are free, they come, they go, they play in the forest, they swim in the river, they are free.”

One afternoon was devoted to **Human Rights Defenders**, with reports from countries and Indigenous organisations. 281 Human Rights activist were killed last year – half of them Indigenous people defending their lands from mining companies, loggers and ranchers. It was tragic and confronting. The West Papua representative delivered a passionate speech about the torture, imprisonment and killings of community leaders, while his bare chested, feathered colleague stood stolidly behind him; the Dakota Indians spoke despairingly about a pipe line being built through their land without consultation or concern.

The fortitude and strength of Indigenous women was celebrated and their pivotal role in supporting families and communities acknowledged. However, they are among the most vulnerable - often left to maintain communities while the men go to towns for work, with limited or no access to health and social services and subject to increasing domestic violence.

Indigenous youth are of particular concern as they drift away from communities in search of education and work losing their cultural connections and language. Desperate to make a living they are preyed on by traffickers, often exploited by employers and resort to alcohol and drugs when they find no place in the towns and cities. Despite this there were impressive presentations from young Indigenous New Zealanders, Filipinos and Australians highlighting the needs of their people, calling their governments to task and refusing to be silenced.

There were some glimmers of hope – **50,000 Indigenous women in Guatemala** own or run small businesses; **the Sami** fought the Norwegian government for years and finally have a parliament with legislated rights; **tribal groups in the Philippines** have trained youth leaders to take responsibility for programs; other countries are allocating and protecting land for Indigenous people while the UN is making considerable efforts to support Indigenous people. This week there are closed meetings as senior UN officials negotiate with the more recalcitrant countries – they were hoping to tackle Indonesia about West Papua and the US about the pipeline.

The Sustainable Agenda with its framework of human rights and its promise “**to leave no one behind**” offers hope to Indigenous people if they are given a voice in their nations’ plans and opportunities to share their extensive knowledge of culture, spirituality and creation. Despite the myriad challenges facing Indigenous people there was a sense that united they could do much and that the “great silence” was never an option.