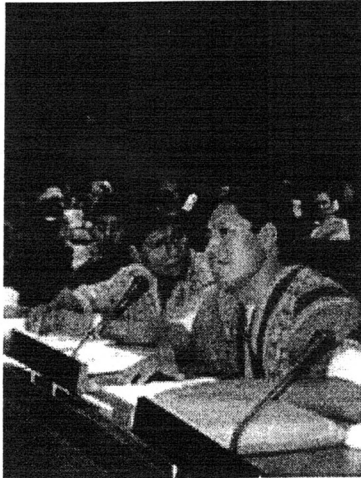


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Latin America's Forgotten Voices

Conference participants

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Earlier this month, leaders of indigenous people all over the world gathered at the UN to address the concerns of their constituents in a global forum. The two-day conference was in honor and acknowledgment of the United Nations' International Day of the World's Indigenous People.

"About 30 percent of these participants are from Spanish-speaking countries," says UN conference speaker Alberto Saldamando of the International Indian Treaty Council. "We have always had close ties to organizations in South and Central America."

Included in the forum was a one-day dialogue on Indigenous Children and Youth, during which a particularly moving address by a 21-year-old Maya Mam activist Ren Garcia, of CONAVIGUA [the Movimiento de Jovenes Mayas por la Objecion de Conciencia], implored the UN to more forcefully assert its stance against forced military conscription of indigenous youth. Among numerous atrocities documented in his Central American homeland, he highlighted the so-called "scorched earth" policy of the Guatemalan army, which he

said "particularly affected Mayan communities, killing children in those areas," adding the grim statistic that "11 percent of the total number of 'disappeared' persons in Guatemala have been children."

Further addressing post-war concerns in Central America, delegate Olga Molina, of Casa Del Sol in El Salvador, spoke for the concerns of Indian women in particular who, though not involved in the armed conflict, "neither in the military nor the FMLN," were nevertheless not included in the national reconstruction programs.

Elsewhere, too, the situation is the same, as evidenced by the presentation by UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, Olar Otunnu, who recalled, "Last year I was in Colombia and [the indigenous communities there] are displaced not only because of war, but for what has been called 'land cleansing,' being driven off their land so that the warlords and militias can take [it] over officially, in the name of war."



One key factor which contributes to these actions, that of race and racial discrimination, was central to the theme of the second day's forum, a preparatory Consultation for the World Conference Against Racism, under the UN's auspices, to be held in 2001 in Johannesburg, South Africa. In the Spanish-speaking Americas, post-colonial definitions of race,

specifically who is defined as an Indian and who is not, make this issue and that of indigenous representation more complex than in other parts of the world.

Whereas the CIA World Factbook reveals a Guatemalan population that is close to 100 percent Indian ancestry, including people of mixed race, the percentages of those identifying themselves or acknowledged by their respective governments as indigenous or Indian peoples is much smaller. The statistics are similar in many countries, including Peru (82 percent), Mexico (90 percent) and Bolivia (85 percent). Conversely, in Canada, the Métis [whose name

is the French language equivalent to "mestizo"], of mixed French and Indian blood, define themselves and are recognized as indigenous peoples. New Zealand Maori, too, are today comprised mainly of mixed-race people, Maori and European, who retain specific rights and identity as indigenous peoples. It is therefore this intra-cultural identity conflict that arguably interferes with the resolution of land claims, cultural preservation and access to basic needs fulfillment put forth by Indian-identified communities in Latin America.

Says Saldamando, himself a Chicano from San Francisco, "South Americans come here to the U.S. and are shocked when they see all these Indians, that is, people identifying as Indians who don't look like 'Indians' to them." The reason for this, he theorizes, is that back home in their countries, "Indian Mestizos call themselves 'Latino,' and to become 'Latino,' all you have to do is put on a tie. That term," he argues, "is really just a social construct, emphasizing a very white identity."

The issue of ethnic identification and the right to recognition thereof is of particular concern to Taino peoples of the Caribbean, particularly those from Puerto Rico. Roberto Borerro, who is both Vice Chair of the NGO Committee on the UN International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples and President of the United Confederation of Taino Peoples, says "'Puerto Rican' is a national identification; our people must be allowed to affirm their indigenous identity within that national construct." Because this level of awareness with regard to indigenous issues is relatively new for most Puerto Ricans, however, Borerro allows, "It remains to be seen how much participation they will have in the UN on those matters."

If this years' prominent representation by Taino, Quechua, Huichol, Maya and other indigenous peoples of Latin America are any indication, their collective voice is sure to continue reaching new heights - and for years to come.