

**United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Languages
January 19 – 21, 2016, UN Headquarters in New York
Joint statement by the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) and the National Native
American Boarding School Healing Coalition (N-NABS-HC)
Presented by Andrea Carmen, IITC and N-NABS-HC**

Thank you Madame Chair.

We begin by affirming the core importance of the Right to Language for Indigenous Peoples. The concept note for this Expert Group Meeting recognizes this right as expressed in Articles 13, 14 and 16 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, the fulfillment of rights affirmed in other articles is also integrally linked to the continuity and vitality of our languages which, as many have expressed, are gravely threatened today. These include, inter-alia, the ability to exercise and transmit traditional knowledge and practices related to cultural traditions (Article 11), spiritual and religious traditions, ceremonies and sites (Article 12), subsistence (Article 20), traditional health practices (Article 24), spiritual relationship to and continued use of traditional lands and resources (Articles 25 and 26), Environment (Article 29), Cultural Heritage including knowledge of flora and fauna (Article 31), and Treaties and Agreements (Article 37). We request that the fundamental importance of Indigenous languages in relation to a wide range of Indigenous Peoples' rights be emphasized in the report of this EGM.

The International Indian Treaty Council and the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition express our appreciation for the presentations made by the Indigenous experts and other participants from all regions at this meeting addressing this critical theme. We express in particular our strong support for the calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada presented by EMRIP member and former Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner Chief Wilton Littlechild. These calls to action are the product of 5 years of information and testimonies from over 7000 survivors of the Canadian Residential Schools policy of forced removal and assimilation of Indigenous children. The Canadian Residential Schools were intended to destroy the identity of these children, including their cultures and languages. This policy has been referred to as cultural genocide.

Although the United States government has never accepted responsibility and has barely even acknowledged this policy and its historical and continuing legacies, Indigenous Peoples whose lands were annexed by the US suffered an almost identical assimilation and cultural destruction policy. The stated purpose of the US Indian Boarding School policy, which forcibly removed tens of thousands of Indigenous children from their families and communities to place them in government and church-run schools, was to "Kill the Indian, Save the Man". The United States version of this policy is documented to have served as the model for the Canadian policy. Similar government-mandated assimilation programs targeting Indigenous children were also carried out in other countries such as New Zealand and Australia.

Rations, annuities, and other goods were withheld from parents and guardians who refused to send children to these schools after the US Congress passed a compulsory attendance law for American Indians in 1891. Resistance was sometimes met with incarceration in federal prison.

From the 1890s through the 1930s, attendance of Indigenous children in off-reservation boarding schools reached its peak. In 1931, 29% of Indian children who were in school were in boarding schools away from their families and communities. Many Indigenous children were involuntarily leased out to white homes as menial labor during the summers rather than sent back to their homes, furthering their long-term isolation and separation from their languages and cultures.

By the late 1920s, nearly half of school enrollments were in off-reservation schools. An estimated 100,000 children passed through these schools between 1879 and the 1960s. Punishments constituted torture of small children if they were caught speaking their Indigenous Mother tongues. The heartbreak and brutality was so extreme that, as in Canada, many children did not survive the treatment they suffered in these Boarding Schools.

As in Canada and other countries with similar policies, the ongoing impacts on Indigenous languages were devastating, just as intended. Indigenous languages along with other aspects of Indigenous culture and identity were a focal point of brutal abuse. Professor Denise Lajimodiere, Board member and former Chair of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, testified to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights October 29th, 2010, that “[M]y mother was locked in a closet because she didn’t speak English.” Based on interviews with survivors she added that “[P]eople told me about having pins stuck in their tongues and getting their mouths washed out with lye soap if they spoke Indigenous languages.” Andrea Smith testified at the same hearing that as direct result of these policies, of the approximately 155 Indigenous languages still spoken in the US, it is estimated that 90% will be extinct in 10 years. By 2050, there will be only 20 languages left, of which 90 percent will be facing extinction by 2060.

To date, no Truth and Reconciliation process or any real access to justice has been afforded to Indigenous Peoples in the US who continue to suffer inter-generational trauma and ongoing impacts including loss of their languages. No comprehensive federal programs have been put in place to provide adequate, sustained support to Indigenous Nations and communities seeking to reverse language loss and other devastating effects that persist from one generation to the next.

We therefore call upon both this EGM and the report of the UNPFII’s 15th session in May of this year to include the following recommendations:

1. The EGM on Indigenous Languages and the UNPFII supports and endorses the 94 Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the Residential Schools in Canada, and requests that Canada report on the progress in their implementation, including the provisions on Indigenous languages and implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as a model for good practices that can and should be duplicated in other States.
2. The UNPFII calls on other countries including the United States that had policies of forced removal and assimilation of Indigenous Children with the intent or result of undermining the viability or jeopardizing the inter-generational survival of Indigenous languages, to implement the Canada TRC Calls to Action in their own countries, in collaboration and coordination with the impacted Indigenous Peoples.

Cheoque Utesia. Thank you.