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**UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION on HUMAN RIGHTS
53rd Session**

**Statement on behalf of Pax Christi International
ITEM 24**

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Mr. Chairman,

Pax Christi International has closely followed the work of the Working Group established in accordance with Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1995/32 of March 3, 1995 to elaborate a draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. It is appreciated that a growing number of indigenous organisations has been approved to participate in the Commission's working group. However, during the second session of the working group last October the indigenous people's representatives were not included in the decision making process with regard to the organisation of work and the agenda setting procedure.

Is the future Declaration to have any real value the full participation of indigenous people is crucial and should be ensured in the forthcoming work of the Working Group of the Commission. In this regard we request the Commission to ensure the full and equal participation of indigenous peoples in this working group.

Although we understand that discussion on certain issues regarding the draft declaration is still necessary for legal purposes and that governments would like to have more discussion on several issues, the draft declaration as it stand now should serve as the starting point and the minimum standard for the discussion and should not be redrafted from scratch.

Although we appreciate the work done towards a draft declaration on indigenous peoples, we believe that more is needed to improve the situation of the indigenous peoples in all areas. Therefore, we urge the UN to establish a Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples at the highest level. This forum should be at such a level that the discussion does not limit itself to human rights in the narrow sense but encompasses all other aspects also relevant to indigenous peoples such as social and economic issues, cultural issues and political issues.

We are concerned that the latest round of negotiations between the government of Bangladesh and the JSS has not resulted in any progress towards a solution to the conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. We believe it is essential that the UN and the international community in general closely monitor the efforts of both sides to reach agreement.

In Australia, we have been increasingly concerned at the withdrawal by the new government from commitments made to the Aboriginal peoples in the past with respect to their human rights.

In December 1996, the two Mapuche communities Norquino - Puel-Salazar and Ruka Choroy were forcibly evicted from their ancestral lands. Under Argentinean law this is illegal, since title of the land is officially held by local Mapuche communities. The eviction of the communities took place under dubious conditions.

We wish to refer to the urgent situation of the Navajo and Hopi families in northern Arizona who are currently facing relocation. This situation was addressed by the Sub-commission in resolution 1990/344. We are concerned at reports that a deadline was set on March 31 for the Navajo Traditional Elders to sign the Accommodation Agreement which would result in the eviction from their homelands. We were hopeful that the court-ordered mediation in which both the Hopi and the Navajo participated, would lead to a peaceful settlement of the situation, but unfortunately, these mediation efforts appear to have reached a deadlock. Furthermore, the Hopi Tribal Council voted against an extension of the deadline on March 10.

Since Traditional Elders of both Navajo and Hopi have expressed the wish to continue the dialogue in order to resolve the relocation situation by agreement, we urge the United States Government not to enforce the March 31 deadline, but to promote further negotiations between representatives of the Navajo and Hopi Traditional Elders. We believe that dialogue is the only way towards a peaceful settlement, respecting the rights and dignity of the families directly involved.

In West Papua, intimidation and repression of Papuans continues by the Indonesian authorities. Evictions of indigenous people from their villages in order to make way for an expansion of mining concessions continues to provoke resistance and clashes.

The forced relocation in Burma of tens of thousands of Mon and Karenni villagers by SLORC is particularly distressing. The deported people are made to do forced labour in intolerable conditions.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, we welcome the fact the Papua New Guinea has abandoned the use of mercenaries in Bougainville. Everyone is familiar with the circumstances of their departure. At the same time, we remain concerned that nothing is being done to bring the parties to the conflict to a meaningful dialogue. We urge the Commission to request the Secretary General to resume lending his good offices to facilitate a dialogue and negotiations towards a just and lasting peace.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.