

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to address this high-level meeting dedicated to the rights of indigenous peoples. As a member of an indigenous people – Estonians have lived on our present territory for several thousand years – I am especially happy to see among you so many about whom this conference is concerned. Thus we can discuss issues faced by indigenous people together. We have stood on both sides, as an oppressed indigenous people and now as a member of the United Nations. We know what indigenous peoples face. I would like also to flag at the very outset that it is unfortunate that the participation of indigenous peoples in UN fora is constantly questioned. It is incomprehensible, if not to say bizarre and shameful that some states attempt to hinder the participation of indigenous peoples, offering no explanation of their actions. We hope that this will soon be the past and that indigenous peoples will have a strong voice in the international community.

I recall that you, the indigenous peoples, the ones most directly affected by the provisions of the outcome document we are to adopt today, could not participate in the negotiations about it at the very last stages. However, I believe that your input in the earlier stages provided a good basis for joint ownership of this document.

I am pleased that in the outcome document today we reaffirm our commitment to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). It includes clear deliverables to further improve indigenous peoples' rights, including stronger action by the UN. I hope that the outcome document will serve as a basis for the way ahead and we are looking forward to its swift implementation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The rights of indigenous peoples must be respected. The great majority of states do so, voicing their support for the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. So too has Estonia. Unfortunately, however, in many countries, material gains are often prioritized over fundamental rights. It is crucial to understand that the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples is a form of wealth that clearly outweighs the economic profit gained by extensive and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. This reckless pursuit of profit at the expense of peoples'

culture is precisely what we have witnessed in many Finno-Ugric areas.

For Estonians, the future of Finno-Ugric peoples with whom we are linked in kinship and language is particularly close to our hearts. We know and have felt the fear of extinction. We have observed with concern that their populations have decreased, while socio-political activism to improve to their position has not always corresponded to this major challenge. The worst scenario, in our view, would be that national organizations vanish, leaders marginalized and the countries where they live indifferent – claiming that indigenous peoples as such have, to quote a phrase we know from the soviet era, "no perspective".

Urbanization, industrialization, world wars, deportations and extensive migration all have left deep wounds within many indigenous populations. Including, for example, the Votic population, our Finno-Ugric cousins. A few years before the turn of the millennium the construction of the large Laugasuu (Ust-Luga) port began. It is being built on traditional Votic lands where our cousins have lived for as long on their territory as we Estonians on ours. This construction poses a great danger to the last three remaining Votic villages: Luutsa, Liivtsülä and Jõgõperä. Even though the construction of Laugasuu port is in conflict with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the current situation faced by the Votes is hardly unique. We all know there is a long list of indigenous peoples living in the most challenging of conditions. For example, side by side with the Votes lives another small Finno-Ugric nation, the Izhorians, who are especially endangered by the plan to erect a chemical plant right next to the their villages of Rutši and Viistina. If the chemical plant is be erected and the environment destroyed, the nation and culture would be endangered and might be even destroyed. And mankind will grow ever poorer.

To support our kindred-nations, the Estonian Government launched the Kindred Peoples Programme in 1999. It is a government aid programme for supporting indigenous Uralic languages and cultures. It provides support in five different fields – education and training courses, research, culture and information exchange, as well as healthcare and protection of the environment. For years Estonian experts have contributed to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and our government has provided financial support to the UN Fund on Indigenous Populations. We shall continue to do so in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to acknowledge New Zealand for always including Māori peoples in their delegation

and meetings. I'd like to thank Finland, Norway and Sweden for guaranteeing a representative Sami delegation to all of the indigenous peoples' meetings at the UN and for voicing their sincere concern about the future of indigenous peoples. I'd like to associate myself with the Finnish President's remarks about Koola Sami people being prevented from attending the meeting. I'd like to thank Ukraine for supporting the UNDRIP and recognising the Crimean Tatars as an indigenous peoples; I'd like to thank many other countries who are taking steps to improve the situation of indigenous peoples.

We are obliged to do everything we can to support indigenous peoples; to respect their past and to grant them their future. Indigenous peoples, no matter if they live in the Leningrad Oblast, Crimea, the Amazonas, New Zealand, Arizona or the Scandinavian peninsula, they must all be fully acknowledged. Let us learn to listen to the voices that have been silenced for too long and too often continue to be. We cannot allow persistence of colonialist mentality to cover-up crimes committed against indigenous peoples, to continue to deny indigenous peoples the right to have a say over their own futures.

To finish, the former Estonian president, the beloved writer and filmmaker Lennart Meri, was one of those individuals who dared to listen to these peoples and to film them. I would like to invite you to the opening of an exhibition of photos of his film journeys in the Conference building today at 6 p.m. It is a tribute to the great filmmaker deeply who cared about the faith of indigenous people.