

Indigenous unite at world forum

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CARACAS, Venezuela - United by the common bond of the 500-year struggle for indigenous rights in the Americas, an indigenous delegation from North America to the World Social Forum in Caracas joined with indigenous from Central and South America to demand protection of indigenous rights.

"Once the people saw our pictures of confrontation struggles and heard the many stories of our problems, the tribal elders got up and spoke of similar problems and saw that we were a people under the same 500-year struggle to maintain land, culture and sovereignty," said Robert Free Galvan, Indian activist from Seattle and organizer of the delegation.

"We challenged the progressives everywhere to work in their own countries to ensure indigenous respect, rights and self-determination, as Venezuela President Hugo Chavez has instigated."

During sessions at the World Social Forum, Sarah James, Gwich'in from Alaska, spoke of the battles and victories to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from oil exploration.

"My elders have instructed me to share the Gwich'in peoples' struggles in a good way," said James, who left weather that was 60 degrees below zero to travel to Venezuela's 93-degree climate.

James and Casey Camp, Ponca Nation from Oklahoma, were asked by the Karina and Wayuu women to participate in the opening of the conference on women's struggles at the forum, which took place in January. James and Camp helped clan mothers and women leaders bless the sessions.

Camp spoke on the industrial environmental damage in her territory, where carbon black production and oil drilling have left a dark stain on the land and water while plumes of toxic smoke fill the air. Camp said Ponca struggle to retain their culture.

During sessions for indigenous, Alex Louie, Okanagan from British Columbia, Canada, spoke on the choice for the future, between confrontation and compromise with Canada in relation to indigenous land claims and sovereignty.

Galvan focused on the academic, non-governmental organization and progressive movements. Galvan said racism and the exclusion of indigenous participation are obvious in the agendas of the global arenas.

"Great speeches of solidarity were delivered, and many invitations to their lands were extended. The tribes then proceeded to invite us to dance with them at several of the tribal dances," he said. Indigenous from Colombia, Brazil and Venezuela, including Yakuana, Picarua, Yukuana, Jivi, Yaua Mauri and Panare, performed several dances.

The North American delegation was hosted by Dr. Noly Fernandez, Venezuela's director of the Ministry of Health for Indigenous People, and her staff.

Galvan said, "We each spoke of building exchanges of visits to each others' territories to promote friendship and solidarity with each others' struggles. Several tribal elders spoke of the great change in attitude and respect for indigenous peoples during the presidency of Chavez.

"We were told stories of their medicine healers, women and men, being pursued tirelessly for years by academics from universities across the globe for their medicine knowledge and to participate in their medicine gatherings.

"They told us the academics are refused, but continue to persistently stalk them," said Galvan, adding that the delegation spoke of the current lawsuit against institutional racism at the University of Washington School of Public Health and Community Medicine for similar attitudes.

The delegation spoke at several sessions with indigenous movement leaders of Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Colombia.

"We were honored to speak and to share our stories," Galvan said. "The need to build economic, cultural and solidarity ties between indigenous people of [the] north and south continents continued to be repeated by the speakers."

The indigenous delegation challenged Brazil's progressives to take action concerning the 520 Guarani and Kaiowa tribes camped along the MS-384 highway in the interior Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul. The tribes were violently evicted from their traditional lands in the Nhande Ru Marangatu reservation during attempts to access diamonds in other tribal lands. Brazil made a commitment to set aside 12 million acres for tribes back in 1995, but has set aside only 1 million acres and continues to evict tribes from promised lands, Galvan said.

The North American indigenous delegation participated in closing ceremonies, which included youth group music and dance performances as well as demonstrations of Indians histories.

"Several tribal groups shared beautiful dances of friendship, which brought the crowds to their feet," Galvan said.

Camp, with experience in the arts and entertainment industry in the United States, joined James and Louie to sing an American Indian Movement song urging the release of Leonard Peltier and other political prisoners, which brought the crowd to their feet.

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