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Helsinki, Finland

International Goodwill and Understanding - Interactive Panel
“World's Indigenous People -- Future Perspective”

by Tex Cornwall, La Mesa Club, Desert Coast Region, SIA

“World's Indigenous People -- Future Perspective” was the title of a thought provoking discussion on the first people to occupy the lands on which they are still living. Three hundred million strong, they exist on all five continents with the largest concentration being the Indians of Mexico and South America.

With their own cultures and social structures, indigenous people have been subjected to harsh and cruel treatment by conquering governments trying to force the adoption of the ‘white man's ways’. A vivid description of this misguided attempt to ‘care for’ these proud people was given by Jackie Huggins, an Australian aborigine, as she told of the humiliations suffered by her people. Slowly things are beginning to change. As with any movement dealing with human rights, it is the women who are demanding reconciliation. Their dreams for their children are the same as any other mother, an opportunity for a good education and the hope for a better future. As one of the speakers quoted, ‘Women of the world, we are the ones who will create the brightest social change in this world’.

The United Nations has recognised the needs and plight of indigenous people and declared this ‘The Decade for World Indigenous People’. The goal is to improve conditions in the areas of health, education, human rights, environment, economics, and social self-governance.

Many nations are beginning to recognise that indigenous people have a basic right to their own culture and social structure. Reconciliation is being brought about by giving them representation and in some instances, self-government.

NGOs are working with the people in many ways. May Lamont of SISWP gave an excellent report on how three Seroptimist clubs in the Townsville area started the Palm Project which combines three different cultures in the Southwest Pacific. She refers to it as ‘Bringing Beijing Back Home’.

The objective of the Palm Project is to encourage women to become working partners in the governance of mankind -- in this case their islands. The first step the Seroptimists undertook was to build a relationship of trust with indigenous women to help them build self-reliance. As a result of the Palm Project, these indigenous people are now productive contributors to society while retaining their own cultures and social structures.

The discussions of the panel may be summed up in this way: Peace can only be achieved by total participation. Now is the time for a healing of the mind; a time to listen to indigenous people; a time for active participation and partnership for reconciliation.