

FOREWORD

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The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization marked its fifth anniversary in 1996. It was a time to look back at what had and had not been achieved, and a time to look to the future and to prepare for it.

In looking back, perhaps the most poignant way of describing the achievements of UNPO is, as one diplomat at the United Nations put it to me: Now the UNPO “is here to stay, one cannot imagine it not being present.”

In the 1980s, most issues concerning captive nations, re-emerging and indigenous peoples, and minorities were still ‘conveniently’ kept away from international attention and confined to ‘domestic’ affairs of states. The exception was the indigenous peoples, especially from the Americas and the Pacific, who were making their voices heard once a year at the Working Group for Indigenous Populations at the United Nations.

The problems faced by most UNPO founding members were not well known outside their immediate regions. But, most significantly, issues affecting these nations, peoples and minorities were not considered to be of international importance and concern. Among the notable exceptions to this paradigm was the course of events in the occupied Baltic States. Within six months after the official founding of UNPO, on 11 February 1991, the Baltic States were free again, and the Soviet Union broke up following Russia’s declaration of independence. Georgia and Armenia, also founding members of UNPO, became independent as well. Then, several years later, Belau (Palau), a U.S. Trust Territory, followed suit.

But, independence is not what most UNPO Members aspire to – most seek effective protection of their national identity, culture and lands. For decades or centuries most have been oppressed, exploited, deported, persecuted, or otherwise denied their fundamental rights. Today, they claim the right to determine their own destiny as the only effective way of securing a future for their children and the generations to come. For each nation or people what the outcome of the exercise of self-determination entails is different. Their mutual demand, though, is to be allowed to express their free choice.

As 1996 ends, the presence, claims and rights of captive nations, peoples and minorities have moved to the center of the international political stage. Sadly, in all too many cases this has occurred as a result of an armed conflict, most often initiated by the state government (for example, the Ogoni, Abkhazian, Chechen, and West Papuan conflicts). Others have managed to raise international attention while keeping the confrontation non-violent (for example, Tibet, Kosova, Sanjak, the Lakota, Crimean Tatars, Ingushetia, Zanzibar, and the Kanaka Maoli). Negotiations have

begun to bring an end to conflicts in East Timor, Bougainville, Chechenia, Abkhazia and other places, notably in South Asia. Some negotiations, such as those in Tatarstan, Gagauzia, and Sakha have provided positive outcomes for all parties concerned.

Now that the aspirations of nations and peoples are acknowledged as issues that need to be addressed, however reluctantly by many States, the challenge presented to the 'unrepresented' nations and peoples and to the UNPO is how to advance their legitimate interests most effectively, while minimizing the risk of armed conflict.

The 46 regular Members of UNPO are no longer entirely unrepresented on the eve of the organization's Fifth General Assembly. This is the UNPO's greatest achievement. Now a difficult task begins, to transform the view and behavior of world leaders and governments to reflect the new reality – that the 21st century will be the century of small nations and peoples.