Greenlanders in Denmark voice their concerns to UN Special Rapporteur
March 18, 2020.- On Tuesday night, before COVID-19 shut down most of Denmark, a dozen people gathered in Copenhagen to meet the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Ms. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz. The meeting, organised by IWGIA and the Greenlandic House, created a space for Greenlanders in Denmark to openly present and discuss the situation and challenges they face and are confronted with in Denmark.

The participants expressed the key challenges they struggle with daily, which include issues of discrimination, lack of recognition of the colonial history between Denmark and Greenland, and Denmark’s unwillingness to discuss the more sensitive parts of past relations between the two countries.

They highlighted that they are often met with prejudice and a lack of understanding and knowledge by Danish authorities and Danish citizens, and, rather than be understood or accepted, are strongly pushed to assimilate in Danish society, which leads to a sense of losing their culture and identity, and thus feeling alienated.

Another significant issue presented was the misrepresentation of Greenland and Greenlandic people in education materials, and the lack of responsiveness in the Danish education system to Greenlanders who come to Denmark to study.

All these challenges, apart from the effects already mentioned, have also had a detrimental effect on the mental health of Greenlanders both in Greenland and Denmark.

A number of participants referred to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), stating that Denmark should not only implement the declaration in its work in development cooperation, but also within Denmark, which several participants stressed was not currently the case.

In response to the testimonies, Ms. Tauli-Corpuz stressed that its part of a true reconciliation process to openly discuss the past: “We need to look at the past to have a better future; claiming history – the right history – not the one written by the colonisers. That is crucial. This is what the struggle is all about: knowing your history; making the state address all of these injustices.”

The Special Rapporteur repeatedly mentioned that within the UN, Denmark is one of the most
Indigenous Peoples-friendly countries and stressed that, “Denmark is doing a lot for Indigenous Peoples around the world; they should do more here in Denmark”.

She also stated that Indigenous Peoples, including Greenlanders in Denmark, need to talk more about pride – pride of their own culture, identity and history – and that Greenlanders have the right to the recognition of their own culture, identity and negative effects of colonisation. That is part of the rights laid out and enshrined in the UNDRIP, which is supported by both Denmark and Greenland.

According to Denmark’s Statistics, today in 2020 there are 16,770 Greenlanders born in Greenland living in Denmark [1]. Several studies have found that Greenlanders are over-represented among socially vulnerable people in Denmark and that the proportion of homelessness is almost 50% higher among Greenlanders than Danes in Denmark [2]. The total Greenlandic population as of July 2019 is 56,225 [3] and approximately 600-800 Greenlandic youth study in Denmark.

The UN Special Rapporteur was in Denmark as part of her official visit to Denmark and Greenland, where she was to examine a diverse range of issues affecting Indigenous Peoples, including self-governance, the administration of justice, the situation of children and youth, housing, access to health services including mental health, and climate change and the right to development and natural resources. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, her visit to Greenland and her planned press conference in Copenhagen has been postponed to April.

Ms. Tauli-Corpuz is an Indigenous leader and activist from the Kankana-ey Igorot people of the Cordillera Region in the Philippines and has been serving as the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples since 2014. She is the former Chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2005-2010). As an Indigenous leader, she was actively engaged in the drafting and adoption of the UNDRIP in 2007.

Special Rapporteurs are independent experts appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council to examine and report on a country situation or a specific human rights issue. They serve in their personal capacity and are independent from any government. They are mandated to undertake two official country visits per year.

The Greenlandic House in Copenhagen [4] has, for the last 40 years, been the meeting place for many resident Greenlanders in Denmark and those interested in Greenland. The house works with and facilitates activities on culture, school service, education and social work, and carries out a number of tasks for Greenland's Self-Government, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Justice in Denmark, as well as a large number of collaborations with public authorities in Denmark and Greenland.

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