

ENCUENTROS



*International
Year of
Indigenous Peoples*

Address by

Rigoberta Menchú

IDB CULTURAL CENTER

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The Cultural Center of the Inter-American Development Bank, an international financial organization, was created in May 1992 at the Bank's headquarters in Washington, D.C., as a gallery for exhibitions and a permanent forum from which to showcase outstanding expressions of the artistic and intellectual life of the Bank's member countries in North, Central and South America, the Caribbean region, Western Europe, Israel and Japan. Through the IDB Cultural Center, the Bank contributes to the understanding of cultural expression as an integral element of the economic and social development of its member countries. The IDB Cultural Center program of art exhibitions, concerts and lectures stimulates dialogue and a greater knowledge of the culture of the Americas.

WELCOMING REMARKS

Madam Rigoberta Menchú: I am extremely sorry that the meetings of Heads of State of the Rio Group in Santiago de Chile on the same day as your visit to Bank Headquarters prevent me from being here with you on this occasion. The Vice-President will extend, on the Bank's behalf, the cordial welcome that you so richly deserve. I thank you for your presence here this week. Your visit, combined with the inauguration of the Cultural Center's exhibition of indigenous art from Colombia's Gold Museum, is this institution's homage to the International Year of Indigenous Peoples. We celebrate your presence for two main reasons. First, because you, like no other, symbolize the international community's recognition of the inalienable rights of the indigenous peoples of the Americas; your life is a symbol of a calm, steadfast, and patient fight for those rights, and your presence here does us honor. Second, because it reminds this Bank of our mission for the economic and social development of the Americas, and of the aspirations and needs of a large bypassed segment of the people of our region to which we must pay preferential attention. We have

made some headway, but much more remains to be done. We are sincerely committed to this. I wish you a pleasant visit among us and welcome you to this Latin American house, the house of a friend.

*Enrique V. Iglesias, President of the IDB,
(delivered by External Relations Advisor,
Muni Figueres).*

It is a great pleasure for me to have the honor of welcoming Rigoberta Menchú in the name of the Bank. I believe that it is important to underscore that the United Nations has declared 1993 the International Year of Indigenous Peoples, and it is an honor for the Bank to participate, through Rigoberta Menchú's visit, in this special recognition of indigenous peoples and their needs that are still not being met.

On a personal note, I would also like to say that it is a great honor for me to introduce Ms. Menchú in the absence of the Bank's President. She is a heroine in our house, someone whom my children honor and respect.

International Year of Indigenous Peoples was presented in the atrium of the Inter-American Development Bank, in Washington, D.C., on October 14, 1993, as part of the IDB Cultural Center's Lectures Program, in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution.

I would like to refer to three issues of utmost importance for all of us here in the Bank: poverty, empowerment, and women. The indigenous population accounts for 10% of the people on this continent and suffers from the highest poverty levels in the region. Therefore, our efforts to alleviate the problem of poverty in Latin America must necessarily include efforts to assist indigenous peoples. With respect to empowerment, the Bank has taken the lead by establishing a new international organization, the Indigenous Fund, earmarked exclusively for development projects for these peoples. The main feature of this Fund is the emphasis it places on encouraging indigenous communities to take the initiative in seeking solutions to their problems. Through endeavors such as land surveying and titling, the Fund is contributing toward strengthening the capacity of indigenous peoples to manage their surroundings and build up their institutions. At the same time, through its Small Projects Program and the health and education components of its other projects, the Bank is already helping to attend to the needs of indigenous peoples. However, the main goal is to work directly through each indigenous community to ensure that authority is delegated to the communities from the bottom up.

The third issue I would like to highlight is women. Through its projects the Bank is focussing not only on how women can contribute, but is also paying attention to their needs as well. This aspect must be included in the work being done with indigenous communities. Therefore, it is a great pleasure for us to welcome among us a woman who not only represents the

indigenous communities in our region, but who also symbolizes the contribution that women can and do make to the process.

I would also like to say that the IDB Cultural Center is very pleased to co-sponsor this event with the Smithsonian Institution. Please note that events involving our distinguished guest will continue this evening with another presentation by her, together with indigenous music groups from Bolivia and Guatemala, in the Andrew Mellon Auditorium, at the Smithsonian Institution.

Let us now welcome Rigoberta Menchú.

*Nancy Birdsall,
Executive Vice-President of the IDB*

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Rigoberta Menchú • 1992 Nobel Peace Prize

First I would like to thank the Inter-American Development Bank and the Smithsonian Institution for this invitation, and for all the work they have done to enable us to share this day with you. I would also like to greet the diplomatic corps and the staff of the Bank and the Smithsonian, since for us, this is a highly meaningful podium in this International Year of Indigenous Peoples.

We have been attempting to undertake a great many tasks; we have wanted to learn about and visit parts of our peoples' land to observe the situation, and to at least leave some testimony before the end of this year. This International Year continues to be a very difficult year in which understanding between indigenous peoples and governments is still in a vacuum, and remains as a huge task ahead of us.

We have just held the Second Summit of Indigenous Peoples in the City of Oaxtepec, Mexico, where we reached several conclusions that we will subsequently have the opportunity to share with each of you, as part of our joint efforts.

I would like to say that for us, and for me in particular, this has been a year of momentous experiences, a very encouraging year, because it has been an occasion to reach a vast number of people around the world, and gain the ear of many institutions, to reaffirm the struggle of indigenous

peoples and our conviction that new relationships must be created in each of our countries, in the international community, in the United Nations, and with the rest of the world's population.

We have high expectations for a more pluralistic world where indigenous peoples will be able to develop our knowledge and help carve out a new path for humanity, in which people are not simply concerned with getting enough to eat every day, but also are concerned with their environment.

This is a very splendid time, because our awareness and our struggles have come to the fore, and will help to shape a better future for indigenous peoples. I have always personally felt that we must rise to the challenge of learning from the self-taught experience of the poor communities, as well as the experience of national leaders, in order for the different organizations established by our societies to make real and effective development more viable for us in the future.

There are many experiences that have not yet been voiced throughout our America, as well as the other continents, where, incredibly, when we visit them, we feel an extraordinary sense of identification, as if the land and experiences were our own. This means that many of the failings of humanity that have caused errors to be taught in schools and other centers of learning, and to be repeated in the mass media, and the main

financial centers, have also transcended other frontiers across the globe, but perhaps this can bind us together with a common hope. The main problems of humanity still focus on the issue of human rights, and therefore the struggle of indigenous peoples cannot be separated from the struggle of women, or from the struggle by society for peaceful co-existence, which will necessarily have to involve mutual understanding among our peoples.

The indigenous peoples who met in Oaxtepec urged all international institutions to help us pave the way, prior to the end of this International Year, to have an "International Decade" declared.

We believe that one year is not enough to solve the problems that have historically divided us into indigenous and non-indigenous, or to revive the values of our ancient cultures and project them into the future. To do so we need action and education on a world-wide scale, and for that we need the main international institutions to support the International Decade. We would like to view that decade as part of the struggle against racism, against discrimination, and on behalf of the rights of women.

Indigenous peoples and women have a great deal in common. Down through the ages, the struggle of women has never been understood. It was viewed as something bizarre, something curious, and even at times, as something ludicrous. The struggle of the indigenous peoples has also been viewed at many points in history as something strange and ridiculous, something that could never succeed. But today when we examine the many problems in the world,

we realize that the struggle of indigenous peoples is a reaffirmation of dignity, a reaffirmation of humanity and all of creation that includes all our lives.

Therefore we also view this year as being a year for women. Since the recent conference in Vienna, united women have made impressive gains. And in Vienna, we would never have believed it possible for indigenous peoples to influence the United Nations Conference on Human Rights, and to make a recommendation to declare an International Decade for Indigenous Peoples. We must not approach this decade as a deepening of contrasts between indigenous peoples and governments, as a potential source of divisions that could jeopardize national unity. It should be approached as an effort to achieve good relations between our peoples, preserving our culture and values, and reencountering science and technology.

I am absolutely certain that there are many viable programs that can save indigenous peoples from being the worst victims of this century, and help them find a different future. I am convinced that there are many indigenous leaders at the forefront of local struggles for land and water, and for greater understanding by society. They have still not made their voices heard in the universities and schools. Perhaps a dedicated decade will bring recognition to these people so that they can contribute to the overall level of education.

I always stress education because I am self-taught. Being self-taught is not simply a gift of God, it is a gift of creation, and at the same time it is a gift of peoples, and experience and opportunity. In other words, when we are given an opportunity, we know

how to make it flower and flourish. I believe that our peoples can facilitate a larger view of civil society, a society that gives priority to the most sacred values of life: working together, individual rights, and collective rights.

Therefore I would like to say that we are facing a challenge to ensure that the International Decade for Indigenous Peoples will not be merely symbolic. I dare to say *symbolic* because I am ambassador for this International Year of Indigenous Peoples, and I am well aware of government policies for the occasion. There is a wide gap between words and deeds in all countries where indigenous peoples live, since no specific funds have been established on the national level or by the United Nations to help indigenous peoples in their struggle.

We have held two international summits of indigenous peoples during the year. But they were made possible by donations ranging from \$100 to \$2000 (and never more than \$10,000), from non-governmental organizations and churches in different corners of the world, and also by donations from our own people. However the United Nations did not provide the funds it had promised for the Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples.

We must raise awareness that this is a common struggle and not just for indigenous peoples; nor is this a crazy idea of Rigoberta Menchú's because she has the podium and has decided to promote a decade. Simply put, the reason for the decade is that the problems of human rights encountered by indigenous peoples continue to be very serious. We see that our people are victims of poverty and marginalization, but they also

have high hopes and a great zest for life. We have been depicted in so many poems, in so much literature, that we are hopeful the world will become more sensitive and not reject its ancestors.

This is a year of struggle to safeguard the diversity and cultural roots that will form the inheritance of the future. I have brought a couple of resolutions with me. It is not my intention to read them aloud but to leave them here with the Bank so people can study them carefully.

Some people might think that when we talk about indigenous peoples we are only referring to remote communities, but there are indigenous peoples who are already working at the institutional level, and I hope they will play leading roles in the coming years.

With the participation of indigenous peoples, the focus will change, and I would like to point out one thing here, since I am also aware of the Bank's work and concerns. I do not believe that the struggle of indigenous peoples should be mixed in with the struggle for the environment, since the latter is a struggle common to all humanity.

Indigenous peoples have other characteristics. We have always believed that mother nature is part of the creation to which we belong, but human beings are part of creation and part of nature. In short, we cannot confuse indigenous peoples with nature, because if we do, we would have to accept that indigenous peoples are being interpreted as an endangered species, and we cannot permit that because we are people and part of all humanity.

I would therefore like to say that in the future we will keep a very close watch on the

national and international instruments for change being created. We are quite excited because we are completing the first revision of a draft United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples, which we will work to have proclaimed as a universal declaration.

This is an extensive project; it has involved almost eleven years of international debate in the U.N., and debate with indigenous peoples. It is still in draft form because it does not yet fully reflect all the ideas of indigenous peoples, but it is well advanced. Therefore we urge you to support it so that it will be approved and give us a starting point to draw up an international convention. Such a convention should not just list areas of concern, but should provide an international legal framework for the struggle of indigenous peoples; this will contribute enormously toward the reach of national laws that will have to be passed in the future.

I think that this is the moment to tell you that we have lived through a great deal of suffering; we have wept for our widowed mothers, and for our fathers who have been tortured and murdered. We have wept for the poverty that has been our lot to live in, and we women have wept perhaps for the dual oppression we experience in our native communities. But this is not the time to lament the past, we must conceive challenges for the future that will bring about understanding and new relationships between governments and indigenous peoples. If this problem is not dealt with urgently, we are certain that new conflicts will arise. Indigenous peoples in many countries feel excluded and marginalized. We also suffer from heavy repression which

could lead in the near future to new conflicts, even armed conflicts. If we wish to live in a world that is more peaceful, fairer, and more humane, international measures must be adopted and people must be given the opportunity to decide what they can and cannot do.

In my opinion, one of the recurring problems is that most projects are decided by large groups of experts who sit behind desks. Over the long term, say twenty years, these experts will still be there, and when they finally go, they leave the communities in the same condition as before. When they go, their traces remain but they are not lasting traces, which is why our people feel a great deal of mistrust toward institutions. What can we do to rebuild trust? Do we need to chart a new course of work? Do we need to consult with the people about what should be done, what they want to do? What can we do about education for indigenous peoples?

Normally education is interpreted in a different way, but I think that the fact we are here together demonstrates our concern to ensure that the future will be better, and I am grateful for all the work that has been done to improve the future of humanity. I thank you very much and I also hope that the affection you feel for Rigoberta Menchú will gradually turn into affection for the village where I was born, and for the cause of all indigenous peoples, and that we can count on support from each of you in the International Decade for Indigenous Peoples.

Next year will be the International Year of the Family. This will be a good opportunity to lay the groundwork for the International Decade for Indigenous Peoples, which we hope will begin at the end of

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December 1994. We will try to involve artists, film makers, the media, and churches, in preparing for this decade. How exhilarating to have a broad audience and to trace out at least some of the challenges. This is our hope; the hope of many of our indigenous brothers and sisters.

I will end here in order not to try your patience. I am glad to see so many friends present; without you it would have been very difficult to make progress. Last Friday we inaugurated the Vicente Menchú Foundation, and we established a symbolic financial fund. We are novices in the area of institution-building, but we created an independent fund for indigenous peoples, which we will administer from Mexico, and coordinate directly with many indigenous colleagues who have attended the summits launched last May.

We are a large network, and we also work in the United Nations, and therefore we would prefer not to wage a completely separate struggle. However, we do need a fund that will permit indigenous leaders to have a presence in regions where conflicts exist or where indigenous peoples are repressed. For example, this year we received large numbers of calls from people in the grip of conflict — for example, the massacre of the Yanomamis — and we were unable to go there because we had no work team, time or money.

We feel that the Decade should consider establishing a fund to permit the most outstanding indigenous leaders in our America and in other continents to travel to areas of conflict and keep a moral record of events. We are excited about this possibility because we never could have dreamed of it

before. It has been worthwhile haunting the corridors of the United Nations, and of many national governments, because we can see results, which is what we find most encouraging.

Thank you for your friendship, and once again I express my pleasure at being here at the Inter-American Development Bank. We are building a new relationship, a new friendship which I hope will grow ever stronger in the future.

Rigoberta Menchú is of Mayan origin, and was born in Guatemala in 1959 at Chimele, El Quiché province. The daughter of farmers, in 1978 she joined the Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC) (Rural Unity Committee), an organization founded to address serious problems of poverty and lack of access to land by the majority of the population. In 1980, her father, the leader of the CUC, died in a fire set by the military while he and 39 others were peacefully occupying the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City. Between 1980 and 1983, the harshest military repression in the history of Guatemala reached the region where Rigoberta Menchú was living, and 440 houses in El Quiché were destroyed. Her mother and younger brother were assassinated.

After her exile in Mexico in 1980, Ms. Menchú participated in United Nations task forces and committees to protect minorities and human rights. In 1984 she published *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (*My Name is Rigoberta Menchú and This is How My Conscience Was Born*) (Siglo Veinte Publishers, Mexico, 1985), which was translated into several languages. In that same year she participated in producing the documentary “Cuando las montañas tiemblan” (“When the Mountains Tremble”), a testimony that describes her life in the historical context of the Guatemalan conflict. Rigoberta Menchú has been awarded many international prizes and honors, including UNESCO’s Education for Peace Prize. In 1992 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and in 1993 the United Nations named her Ambassador for the International Year of Indigenous Peoples.

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