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Qhi dehuá. Good afternoon. This greeting in my native language not only means “good afternoon” but also, “as you leave, God has also left”. In my N̄hañhú culture, we believe God dwells in each human being. This leads us to respect each other more. Another belief is that virtually no one goes to Hell. And this is most reassuring: as a result we do not fear Hell. The only people who may end up there are those who accumulate and do not share. Our sense of community involves a very strong notion of solidarity.

I wish to thank the Swiss government and the organising committee of this conference for their kind invitation to talk about the Mexican government’s public policies on indigenous issues.

I wish to begin by saying that 30 years ago (when I still lived in my small Otomi indigenous community in the Mezquital Valley in the State of Hidalgo, where I was born), if had someone asked me whether I thought some day I would be a member of the President’s Cabinet, I would have answered this was virtually impossible.

Thirty years ago, I had to carry water every day for more than 7 kilometres. In my hometown, there was an elementary school with only one rural teacher.

Thirty years ago, I had two things clear in my mind. First, I did not want to live in my village for the rest of my life. I did not accept what would have become my fate according to the uses and habits of my people: namely, my father

would have had me married when I was still very young. Second, I did not want to be a politician. I was not interested in politics. Politicians always went to our village to tell us lies. They would promise piped water, electricity, and other services. And they never honoured their promises. So, I did not want to be a politician.

I was able to fulfil my first objective. I left my village when I was 14 years old thus avoiding a marriage to someone I did not love. There are certain traditions in our indigenous communities in dire need for change. My second objective ... Well, as you can see, I am here as a member of President Vicente Fox's Cabinet. When President Fox invited me to join his team, I thought it through very thoroughly. I had not voted for him and I was somewhat troubled that he wanted me as a member of his team when we do not share the same political ideas. I told him so, so that he knew.

To me, the concept of working involves serving. We, the indigenous people, are taught that we are born to serve our fellow men and woman. This was exactly what led me to accept his invitation and become involved in this project and leave my career as a business woman (the World Economic Forum at Davos awarded me recognition as one of the 100 Global Leaders in the Future of the World because of my entrepreneurial experience. I do not know whether I have contributed to the future of the world, but in Mexico at least, I know I am indeed doing my best to build a different world).

As you know, Mexico has been a federal republic since 1824. You also know that 300 years before that, Mexico was a colony of Spain founded on the social organisations of the native indigenous peoples dismantled by the

conquerors. It was the indigenous peoples who mined the gold and silver of Mexico. It was the indigenous peoples who built the beautiful colonial cities. It was the indigenous people who worked the estates and agricultural and cattle farming haciendas. In spite of all this, the 1824 constitution did not consider the indigenous peoples at all. The native people of this land were even referred to as foreign peoples. They were considered as aliens. During the Mexican Revolution, the indigenous people were cannon fodder. And once again, the 1917 constitution, resulting from social conflict, ignored the indigenous peoples.

The states of the country were created without considering the indigenous peoples cosmogony. The concept of collectivity is a fundamental concept in our daily life. At the beginning of my speech, I mentioned that one of the most serious sins in my culture is to accumulate. If your neighbour needs the goat or cow you own and you do not share it with him, you are committing a very serious sin. Sharing is part of our day-to-day culture. I am a member of an ejido, and therefore have access to community-owned land. However, since I am not living among the people in my community today, someone else is entitled to work that land. He who truly needs the land is the one to occupy it. This is known as collective rights.

How can you make the titles of a society that bases its development on individual rights compatible with the collective rights of the indigenous peoples persisting today after 500 years?

The indigenous topic re-emerged nationally and internationally on 1 January 1991, exactly on the day when the North American Free Trade Agreement

(NAFTA), signed by Mexico, the United States and Canada, came into force. On that day, the National Liberation Zapatista Army (EZLN, in Spanish) raised its arms in Chiapas to vindicate the rights of the indigenous peoples. In February 1996, the Administration of former President Ernesto Zedillo, signed the San Andrés Larrainzar Agreements with the EZLN and a draft bill was prepared whereby the autonomy and free determination of peoples to develop these cultures is recognised. Interestingly, a supposedly centrist government such as that ruled by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the party ruling the country for over 71 years, was not the one to send this draft bill to be passed by Congress. Perhaps, the PRI felt it would fracture the national state because autonomy and sovereignty are two concepts that are easily confused.

The indigenous peoples claim their right to autonomy in exercising their uses and habits in economic, political, and cultural terms within the nation. The indigenous peoples have never proposed to fracture the country.

What made me accept President Fox's offer was that he told me he would send this draft bill about the indigenous rights and culture to Congress. And he kept his promise. On December 5, 2000, one of his first actions as president was to withdraw the army from the conflict zone. The EZLN had demanded that three conditions should be met before signing a peace agreement with the Mexican government, namely the removal of seven military bases, the release of 100 Zapatán indigenous prisoners, (the so-called political or prisoners or conscientious objectors), and the approval of the draft bill on the indigenous rights and culture, known as the COCOPA Act. Two of these conditions were met. In February 2001, Deputy Commander

Marcos headed the Zapatista March from Chiapas to Mexico City to support the passing of this Act.

On 14 August 2001, the constitutional amendment on indigenous issues was published by the *Official Gazette of the Federation*. This amendment, however, does not satisfy all the demands of the indigenous peoples. Perhaps some fears prevailed, preventing the Act from reaching the thorough recognition of these rights. I feel that we, the indigenous people, need to find the technical arguments to be able to convince the rest of society that the autonomy of our peoples does not jeopardise national unity.

One of the main issues in this amendment is that it does not provide the mechanisms for achieving this purpose. If we compare it to those in other countries where the state is the legal guardian of the indigenous peoples, the Mexican constitution is very advanced. It does recognise the autonomy and free determination of the indigenous peoples. However, it does not accept the setting of indigenous regions. And the problem is that there are peoples who share the same language and culture but are located in three different federal states. This could be solved by the municipalities, but in some of them the indigenous people are only a minority.

At this moment in Mexico, we are waiting for a resolution by the Supreme Court of Justice of Mexico on the controversies submitted by some of the indigenous municipalities disagreeing with this constitutional amendment of 14 August 2001. Clearly, this is evidence that the indigenous peoples are willing to take the legal path as an option for an answer to their demands. Among others, their argument is that the International Labour Organization 169th

Convention was violated because these peoples were not consulted on the constitutional amendment. We hope to hear from the Supreme Court of Justice. The indigenous peoples hope the Supreme Court of Justice will pronounce the sentence in their favour.

Why was there an uprising in Chiapas? To begin to understand this event, you need only to look at some indicators of the indigenous peoples. Mexico is the fourth largest country in terms of indigenous diversity. Our cultural richness is huge. More than 60 languages are spoken with some 30 dialect variations, amounting to a total of about 90 languages spoken throughout the country.

We are more than 12 million indigenous people. This accounts for 13% of the population, living in 803 municipalities. Of these, indigenous residents in 707 live in high to very high marginality. This speaks for the events in the history of our country; how federalism did not work because states and municipalities were decentralised, but indigenous towns continue to be discriminated against inside the municipalities and states. Only three municipalities show a low marginality rate.

The indigenous peoples' life expectancy is 69 years, while nationwide, it is 74 years. In the state of Nuevo León, the municipality with the highest life expectancy in the nation, is Garza García. Compared to Guachochi, in Chihuahua, there is a 19-year difference in life expectancy between a child born in Garza García and Guachochi. Child mortality is 58% higher than the national rate. In other words, about 28 of every 1,000 children born alive, die in other regions, while 48 of 1,000 children die in the indigenous regions, and in regions such as the Tarahumara, 100 out of every 1,000 children die.

While in the Oaxaca municipality, a municipality with a high percentage of indigenous population, there are 0.07 hospital beds, nationwide we have 0.79 hospital beds. Malnutrition is rated at 32% in indigenous communities as opposed to 17% nationwide. Anaemia among pregnant women is also very high in indigenous communities. In terms of infrastructure, the differences are also dismal. Nationwide, 84% of the population has piped water, while it is available to only 55% of indigenous communities. Nationwide, 78% of the population has sewage systems, while only 23% of indigenous communities have it; 95% of the national population has electricity and only 77% of the indigenous communities have it. In telecommunications, only 1% of the communities having more than 70% of indigenous people have telephone lines, while 66% of the population in Mexico City has this service available. Obviously, there has been unfair development in my country.

None the less, to answer the question as to whether the indigenous people are really poor, I would say we are not. We own other kinds of riches. We have 62 different ways of looking at the world and, at a time when other ways to see the world are necessary, it would be interesting to take a closer look at them. The indigenous people have preserved certain very successful organisational and production structures. We have a vast body of knowledge in the field of traditional medicine. We have a biological mega-diversity albeit we are subject to piracy, that is why it is so important to regulate intellectual property rights internationally, and to recognise the rights of origin.

Seventy percent of the oil reservoirs in the Gulf of Mexico are located in municipalities with a strong indigenous presence. The wealth generated in these communities is unbelievable. In turn, their land has been polluted. Most

of the hydroelectric dams are located in indigenous regions, involving the displacement of thousands of indigenous peoples from their hometowns. And, the funny thing is that their current communities still lack electricity. The government did not plan for any program providing them with some royalties for generating electricity in big cities.

The indigenous peoples hold one fifth of the national territory. In their land, the possibilities for generating wealth are huge. The issue is how to negotiate with the rest of the nation, but no longer from the paradigm that the indigenous people are poor.

Many foreigners come to Mexico and find these indigenous cultures wonderful. They ask us not to touch them. They claim these cultures are great the way they are. But they come to Chiapas for no more than a month, and then they go back to their comfortable beds at home. The indigenous peoples have to propose a new scheme to get access to all development opportunities available. The indigenous peoples want development. And they want the necessary infrastructures.

Incidentally, indigenous coffee growers in Mexico export a great deal of their product, organic coffee, to Switzerland and the rest of Europe. The price of coffee today is unbelievably low, far below its production price. These are some of the things leading to impoverishment of the indigenous communities. We must do something about the free market. We can no longer accept prices that are continually being determined by the invisible hand of the market.

The Mexican government is looking for a new relationship between the state and the indigenous peoples. The laws are an issue handled by Congress and

in Mexico the state reform has been discussed at length. I hope this reform will also involve the indigenous issues. We have proposed an inter-cultural dialogue not only in Mexico but with the rest of the world. We are part of a multicultural world. What we need now is inter-cultural dialogue. We need to strengthen our differences. And that is precisely the enormous wealth Mexico has as a nation. The major tourism appeal of Mexico is the huge linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and food diversity of our country. It varies even in terms of climates including desert, mountains, and beaches. We need to look for fairness and equal opportunities. We must be included in development programs. We need a transparent management of resources and the right to our diversity, identity and free determination. The choice we have in federalism is the creation of these autonomous indigenous regions within the nation, with a fair access to all its resources.