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Racism, Diversity and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

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One of the pillars of the world human rights movement is the struggle against the numerous facets of racism and discrimination, which has gone through several important stages. The first, on which the United Nations based its early activities, involved overcoming the legacy of the Holocaust and Nazi racial ideology. The second stage, mainly directed at apartheid, was linked to the liberation of Third World peoples from colonialism and its sequels. The third and latest stage involves extensive international migrations in an era of globalization and the need to build inclusive multicultural societies around the world. Whereas some analysts see in these movements one more example of a clash of civilizations, others see them as a challenge for the pursuit of the right of diversity, one of the principal human rights concerns at the present time.

Indigenous peoples in the world have been perennial victims of racism and discrimination since colonial times, and they are still struggling to obtain their fundamental human rights, especially the right to self-determination as guaranteed in international legal instruments. The end of discrimination and racism may mean more equal opportunities and a fuller enjoyment of human rights, but indigenous peoples are also demanding the right to be different, to maintain their cultures and identities, to be self-governing and to have full access to their traditional lands, territories and resources.

These human rights issues are currently being debated in many countries (including Canada and Mexico) and they are being dealt with at the international level as well. In 2001 the United Nations organized the World Conference against Racism, Discrimination and Intolerance and in 2005 the General Assembly proclaimed the second international decade of indigenous peoples. While the challenges and obstacles are many, hopefully in this emerging favorable international atmosphere the rights of indigenous peoples will receive increasing recognition as one more step in the direction of a world free from racism and discrimination.