

# Permanent forum in the UN seen as reality for Native peoples

By Lisa Schlein

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Menchu of Guatemala during the 1993 Human Rights Conference in the Austrian capital Vienna. It was conceived as a body which would address matters of fundamental importance to indigenous peoples and function at the highest levels of the UN.

Indigenous peoples appear to be getting much of what they want. A consensus has been reached for there to be equal representation and direct participation by indigenous peoples and governments in the forum and that it be a body that will report directly to the UN Economic and Social Council.

"In other words, it would be established in terms of the United Nations hierarchy at exactly the same level as the Commission on Human Rights," Epstein said "That's very, very significant."

Littlechild believes the proposed

mandate of the Forum is too narrowly focused on issues dealing with economic, social and cultural rights. He is disappointed the mandate leaves out civil and political rights "which are very, very important for us in considering our land, natural resources and treaty rights."

Nevertheless, Littlechild considers what has been achieved "a very significant victory." He remembered in 1977, indigenous peoples weren't even able to get into the United Nations building, let alone air their grievances.

He proudly notes how far the world's aboriginal people have come in 23 years to being at the point of achieving equality within the very system that had rejected them.

As it's shaping up now, the Permanent Forum will have a core group of elected indigenous and government representatives who will meet once a year.

There will be a permanent secretariat that will work throughout the year. It will be able to consult experts and carry out studies having to do with indigenous issues.

If the Forum is approved at the Human Rights Commission, which begins its six-week session March 20, the proposal will go to Economic and Social Council for approval and then on to the General

Assembly for adoption.

Epstein thinks the proposal will move through the UN's bureaucratic maze very quickly. "I think we'll have a forum in one year or two years at the outside."

But Littlechild said he will not participate as a core member of the Permanent Forum. He believes it's time for younger people to take the cause of indigenous rights into the future.