

Obama: US will back UN on rights of native peoples

WASHINGTON, D.C. (AP) — President Barack Obama said that the United States will reverse course and support a United Nations declaration defending the rights of indigenous peoples.

Obama told American Indian leaders that the declaration affirms the importance and rich cultures of native peoples throughout the world.

The U.S. voted against the declaration when the General Assembly adopted it in 2007, arguing it was incompatible with existing laws. Three other countries, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, also opposed the declaration but have since announced their support.

The declaration is intended to protect the rights of more than 370 million native peoples worldwide, affirming their equality and ability to maintain

their own institutions, cultures and spiritual traditions. It sets standards to fight discrimination and marginalization and eliminate human rights violations.

Administration officials said last April that they were reviewing the U.S. position on the declaration. The State Department called the decision to support the declaration a "meaningful change in the U.S. position" that resulted from a comprehensive review that included consultation with tribes.

While not legally binding, the declaration "carries considerable moral and political force and complements the president's ongoing efforts to address historical inequities faced by indigenous communities in the United States," the State Department said in a statement.

More important than any resolution or declaration are

actions to match those words, Obama said, adding that his administration is working to help Indian tribes meet a variety of challenges.

Obama noted that this year he signed laws to improve health care and law enforcement for Native American tribes and helped resolve long-standing disputes over discrimination against American Indian farmers by the Agriculture Department and mistreatment by the Interior Department of those with royalty rights for oil, gas, grazing and timber.

"We're making progress. We're moving forward. And what I hope is that we are seeing a turning point in the relationship between our nations," Obama told a conference of tribal nations attended by more than 500 people representing more than 320 tribes.

Those efforts include creating jobs, building roads on reservations, improving education and improving health care, Obama said.

He recalled that Crow Indians gave him the name "One who helps people throughout the land." And he joked that his wife, Michelle, says his name should be "One who isn't picking up his shoes and his socks."

Timothy Hinton, vice chairman of the White Mountain Apache Tribe in Arizona, said Obama's support for the U.N. declaration is among several steps forward the administration has taken this year on Native American issues. The new Indian Health Care Act, Tribal Law and Order Act and the resolution of disputes with farmers and royalty holders are landmark events and fulfill campaign promises Obama made, Hinton said.

The settlement of the nearly 15-year-old Cobell royalty case, which Obama signed last week, includes separate measures settling four long-standing disputes over Native American water rights in Arizona, New Mexico and Montana. Among the tribes winning settlements were the White Mountain Apaches, who will receive \$292 million for construction and operation of a rural water system. The payment settles a dispute over water rights on the reservation that dates to 1917.

"I think it's a real new start for Indian Country," Hinton said, adding that the flurry of activity on tribal issues "helps us get started in every way."

Robert Coulter, executive director of the Indian Law Resource Center, an advocacy group, called the U.N. declaration on the rights of indigenous

peoples the most significant development in international human rights law in decades.

The U.S. endorsement "reflects the worldwide acceptance of indigenous peoples and our governments as a permanent part of the world community and the countries where we live," Coulter said. "International human rights law now recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples as peoples, including rights of self-determination, property and culture."

In a related development, the U.S. Department of Energy said Thursday it is creating an Office of Indian Energy Policy and Programs to promote tribal energy development. The new office will be led by Tracey LeBeau, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe of South Dakota.

Leaders from Indian Country confer with President

President Obama met earlier this month with 12 tribal leaders to hear directly from Indian Country about their policy priorities and concerns.

The President conveyed to the leaders his commitment to strengthen and build upon the government to government relationship with Indian Country. He also noted that while much progress has been made, more remains to be done, and he is committed to working with the Native American community to achieve those goals.

The 12 leaders who met with the President represent the geographic diversity of the country and they were selected by their regional peers. The leaders are:

Chairman Cladoosby of the Swinomish Tribe; President Shirley of the Navajo Nation; Chairman Black Eagle of the Crow Tribe; Chairman Smith of the Pala Band of Mission Indians; Chief Red Eagle of the Osage Nation.

Chairperson Edwards of the Caddo Nation of Oklahoma; Chairman Barbry of the Tunica-



Leaders of tribes from across Indian Country meet with President Obama and staff.

Biloxi Indian Tribe; Chairman of the Three Affiliated Tribes; Chairman Wright of the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe; Chairman Hayes of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe.

President Thomas of the Central Council Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska; Chairwoman Diver of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa.

Also in the December 15 meeting were Attorney General Eric Holder, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, White

House Senior Advisor Valerie Jarrett, White House Domestic Policy Council Director Melody Barnes and other Administration officials.

Study requested for Native Hawaiian government

HONOLULU (AP) — A federal government spending measure pending in the U.S. Senate calls for a study on forming a Native Hawaiian governing entity.

The one-sentence language mandating the study was inserted into a \$1.27 trillion appropriations bill that's expected to be considered this week.

The study's unspecified cost would be paid by the Department of the Interior.

It would involve community and government groups to recommend a mechanism for the reorganization of a Native Hawaiian governing entity, with recognition of that entity by the United States as an Indian tribe.



It seems like it was yesterday when we learned to ride our bikes together, discovered that we both liked to dance and speak our language. It seems like we were never apart and everyone knew we were best friends. When we decided to go to school, we made sure we were going to be roommates. When you finally landed that first job after all your hard work, I was the first to say "congratulations." When you said you wanted to help the youth on the reservation, I said, "Let's do it together." Then came a time when you told me that you have a mental health problem, like depression and anxiety. Now I know that anyone can experience mental health problems, even Native People. We thought we knew everything, yet I really didn't understand what a difference my support can make in your recovery. Well, I am here for you. I will be here for you. And—as always—we will recover together.



Visit www.whatadifference.samhsa.gov/native to learn how you can help support a friend.