Statement of Aleut International Association

Kiruna Sweden

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This statement is being made on behalf of AIA President Arlene Gundersen of Sand Point, Alaska, who is not able to be here today.

Ministers, colleagues, friends

It is interesting to note that the next two years will represent the first Canadian Chairmanship of the Arctic Council for Aleut International Association. AIA was not established by the Ottawa Declaration, but two years later in 1998 by the Iqaluit Declaration when we became the fourth Permanent Participant of the Arctic Council. The Iqaluit Declaration also added four observer countries and eight observer organizations to the Council, almost all of which are still deeply involved in the work of the Council to this day. Two years later, in the Barrow Declaration, AAC and GCI were added, bringing the PP’s to their present number within the Council, six. This was the same year that the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment was endorsed and adopted as a project and ACAP was established as a working group. This demonstrates that change has often been a part of the Arctic Council, and that change has nearly always resulted in a stronger Council, better able to fulfill its mandate. The end of the Swedish Chairmanship of the Council marks several changes, a newly established permanent Arctic Council Secretariat, updates to the policies and procedures of the Council, a new focus on including business and industry in the Council and the welcoming of new observer states. All of these changes are also made with an eye towards strengthening the Council and helping it be better able to respond to an more rapidly changing Arctic and an increasing focus on the Arctic globally, yet it is still the mandate established by the Ottawa Declaration that guides the work of the Arctic Council.

What the Ottawa Declaration established was truly unique, not because it included all the Arctic States, or it established working groups, or because it provided a means for observers to participate. The Arctic Council is unique because it includes the voice of the indigenous people of the Arctic, sitting at the same table as the Arctic States. It is this special and particular relationship between the Arctic States and the Permanent Participants that is the true heart of the Arctic Council and without the full and meaningful participation of Indigenous people of the Arctic, the Arctic Council becomes just another intergovernmental forum.

There can be no doubt that the work of the Arctic Council, is vitally important to the Aleut people of the Aleutian, Commander and Pribilof Islands of the United States and Russian Federation, their well-being has been tied to the marine environment for millennia, so safe shipping, healthy biodiversity, freedom from contaminants and an understanding of what to expect from a changing climate are essential for the continuation of the Aleut way of life. The Aleut people are supremely adaptable; they have survived invasion, disease, forced relocation, war, internment, and nuclear testing on their land, all while living in a tremendously challenging physical environment. Despite this resilience the challenges facing the Aleuts and indeed all of the Indigenous people of the Arctic are more varied than ever before. Now more than ever the Permanent Participants need the support of the Arctic Council to insure that their voice, their knowledge and their insight remains a strong, vibrant part of the Council for all future Chairmanships.
At AIA we celebrate the accomplishments of the Swedish Chairmanship and are truly looking forward to our first Canadian Chairmanship, to new initiatives and new voices in the Arctic Council dialog. We don’t fear change in the Arctic Council, we don’t fear opinions we disagree with, but also, the Arctic Council must not fear to exert leadership globally, taking advantage of its outstanding suite of tools for research, monitoring and assessment to make policies for the Arctic based on sound science. We relish the idea of a dialog that includes all and guided by the wisdom of the Ottawa declaration we know that the way forward will be towards an improvement in the lives of all of the people of the Arctic, with a unique, special, and particular emphasis on those who lived here first.

Thank you.