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NAIHC Holds Indian Country Briefing for the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing

Indian leaders agree on the great need for adequate housing in Native communities.

WASHINGTON, DC—November 10, 2009—Tribal leaders and national Indian organization representatives shared their tribal housing concerns during a briefing for the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing on Saturday. The briefing, organized by the National American Indian Housing Council (NAIHC), is a part of the Special Rapporteur Raquel Rolnik’s examination of housing conditions in the United States. Before meeting with tribal leaders and Indian organizations in Washington, D.C., the Special Rapporteur visited the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota on Nov. 1.

“We are grateful and honored that Ms. Rolnik had the opportunity to examine the housing conditions on the Pine Ridge reservation and meet with tribal leaders,” said NAIHC Chairman Marty Shuravloff. “For those who live on reservations or work for tribal housing authorities, you know first-hand the housing needs in Indian communities. It is important for a non-Indian and a representative from the United Nations to know the conditions as well, and to be familiar with the United States’ trust responsibility to the right for safe and healthy homes.”



Representatives from the National Congress of American Indians, the National Indian Health Board, the Native American Rights Fund and the Friends Committee on National Legislation lead a discussion on how inadequate housing affects other conditions in Native communities, such as health, economic development, education and cultural practices. Elected officials from the Navajo Nation, the Cherokee Nation, the Omaha Tribe and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes told stories of homes without plumbing or electricity, and children and elders who struggle to keep warm during the winter months because their homes have holes in the walls and ceilings covered with cardboard.

“In many homes, you will find multiple generations of families because they lack the ability to afford their own shelter. We are all human, and we all have the basic need to see our families protected from the elements,” said Navajo Nation Vice-President Ben Shelley. “We need a commitment from the U.S. federal government and from the members of the United Nations to address the problems of the Native and Indigenous people of the world. Our needs are great but so is our potential.”

The resounding message that Indian communities need more accessible, affordable and adequate housing was emphasized by all who testified. It's estimated that about 200,000 housing units are immediately needed in Indian Country. Approximately 90,000 Indian families are homeless or under-housed, and about 20% of Indian homes lacks complete plumbing facilities or the infrastructure for those facilities. On the Navajo reservation, 31% of homes lack complete plumbing

“The right to adequate housing is much more than just four walls,” said Special Rapporteur Rolnik. “It’s about building a healthy environment that includes water, sewage, electricity and the access to the basic means of livelihood.”

Special Rapporteur Rolnik, a housing expert from Brazil, said she has worked with Indigenous communities in her home country, and has seen many of those tribes there fighting the same fight here in the United States. She ended her address by stating that the right to housing is not just about homeownership but rather it is about providing healthy homes for generations to come.

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The National American Indian Housing Council (NAIHC) was founded in 1974 as a 501(c)(3) corporation. NAIHC is the only national organization representing housing interests of Native people who reside in Indian communities, Alaska Native Villages, and on native Hawaiian Home Lands.