Ovide Mercredi
Opening Remarks – UN High Level Political Forum 2023
Townhall Meeting on "Overcoming the crises, driving change and leaving no one behind". (July 10, 2023, New York, USA)

"Leaving no one behind" is a beautiful promise, one we can all support, yet many people do not enjoy the basic human rights which are generally accepted as inherent to all persons.

I speak to you today as an older Cree man who has watched rights being denied to older persons and to Indigenous persons before, during and after the crisis that was COVID 19.

The pandemic clearly illustrated what we all know, that inequities rob many of their basic human rights.

The United Nations, though the sustainable development goals (SDG's) and through a true commitment to human rights, can make meaningful change in the lives of people left behind.

To overcome the crises of the pandemic we have to be honest about what happened and look at ways to ensure we never find ourselves repeating the same mistakes.

Older persons died of malnutrition and dehydration in downtown Toronto and Montreal, two of the richest cities in one of the richest countries in the world.

Canada, shamefully, having the highest death rate in Long Term Care of all of the OECD countries during the first two phases of the pandemic. Although, frankly, they were all awful.

Older persons denied access to health care, despite being the most impacted by COVID 19.

Later older persons made up 90% of the deaths in the heat dome that happened in British Columbia in the middle of the pandemic, a situation where the

governments of Canada and British Columbia were called out by Human Rights Watch.

These human rights violations experienced by older persons in the pandemic are familiar to me as an Indigenous person.

I have seen it all before, the denial of the right to health in communities where there's are no hospitals and where Indigenous people are forced to get healthcare many miles away from their families, communities and culture.

Where access to the basic necessities of life called for in the SDG's – access to water, to climate action, to innovation and infrastructure and to sustainable communities, are all sadly lacking.

I have spent my adult life fighting for the rights of First Nations people. I can assure you that nothing changes without a commitment to new and fair laws and policies, that do not deny people their basic human rights. We all know words are not enough and to truly "drive change" action is needed and it is clear from evidence that we need to fully address the SDG's

I challenge Member States to commit to real change by addressing the Sustainable Development Goals in a comprehensive manner.

We have the opportunity to better the lives of older persons and address the specific human conditions of Indigenous people around the world.

I also call on all Member States to make a clear commitment, join us in drafting and implementing a United Nations convention on the rights of older persons.

We can ensure that the carnage brought on older persons in the pandemic never happens again, we can overcome the crises, we just need the will and the commitment to human rights and justice.

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