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Under Secretary of the Interior James A. Joseph said today that Indian affairs are now a major priority within the Department of the Interior.

In an address before the National Tribal Chairmen's Association in Atlanta, Georgia, tonight, Joseph described five areas of concern to Indian people in which progress is being made in the Department: internal changes; the commitment to Indian self-determination; the approach to economic development on Indian reservations; the protection of Indian rights; and the development of Indian policy.

The Under Secretary's address was made in the course of a five day visit to Indian communities in Arizona, New Mexico, and North Carolina which began May 22 and concludes May 27.

Joseph said the reason the position of Assistant Secretary for Indian affairs is still vacant is because "we have not wanted to sacrifice the opportunity for a broad input from Indian country simply to get the selection completed quickly."

He added that it was also desired to appoint not simply a Secretary but a new team fully capable of dealing with all the complexities of both the political landscape and Indian advocacy.

“It is not enough," Joseph said "to simply appoint Indians to Indian positions. We intend to go one step further and place Indians in other areas of the Department which have been traditionally anti-Indian."

Highlights of Joseph's remarks include the following:

-- "I want all of you here tonight to know that Indian affairs are now a major priority in the Department of the Interior. I have personally had a lifetime commitment to the improvement of the quality of life for each and every American…and I brought that commitment with me to the Department of the Interior."

-- “We support the fundamental principles of the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act. But we are also aware that the regulations that have been formulated to implement the Act are complex and cumbersome. It is our intention, therefore, to go forward with revisions in accordance with the suggestions we have received from many of you.

-- "As we move into the 'zero base' budget concept for Fiscal Year 1979 we are looking at a budget structure for the Bureau of Indian Affairs on a tribe by tribe rather than a program by program basis." -- "The Department of the Interior will give priority to community development while not ignoring the important role of private entrepreneurial development."

-- "The new team in Interior is committed to the protection of your rights. Our decisions will be based on the concept of justice and equity rather than the political climate at a given moment."

-- "As you move forward on the road of self-determination and you assert rights to which you feel you are legitimately entitled, you will receive opposition from people who feel that the changes threaten their rights. But these fears can be overcome if you will take the time to explain your positions to the

non-Indians who will be affected by them."

In the course of his visit to Indian areas, Joseph met with the Navajo-Hopi Relocation Commission, the BIA Joint Use Project Office in Flagstaff, Arizona, and with Hopi Tribal officials on the Hopi Reservation on May 23. He visited the Navajo Irrigation Project, proposed gasification sites, the Navajo Community College and other areas in New Mexico and Arizona May 24.

On May 25 he held meetings with Navajo Tribal officials and addressed the Navajo Tribal Council in Window Rock, Arizona, visited the Southwest Indian Polytechnic Institute and the All Indian Pueblo Council Cultural Center, and attended a reception by Americans for Indian Opportunity.

On May 27 he will meet with representatives of the Eastern Cherokee Tribe in Asheville, North Carolina.