

Lantos Commission Hearing on Indigenous Peoples
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SUMMARY

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and thanks to you and your colleagues for inviting us here today. Assistant Secretary Mike Posner and the rest of us at State's Human Rights Bureau are extremely grateful for the support we get from members of the Lantos Commission. Your moral leadership has expanded the space for our work to protect human rights abuse victims and their advocates.

Human rights work has several overarching goals. One is the imperative to protect the powerless from the powerful. A second is the creation of vibrant societies where rule of law prevails and civil society plays a prominent role. A third is to foster respect and cooperation between groups in society, and combat discrimination and structural inequalities. All three of these goals are relevant to the situation of indigenous peoples today. The Bureau that I represent -- the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) -- is engaged on all three,

in close cooperation with the U.S. Agency for International Development and other government agencies, with State's regional and functional bureaus, and with our embassies overseas.

UNDRIP

By some counts, there are three hundred and seventy million indigenous persons around the world. Indigenous people, including in the U.S., are among the world's most vulnerable groups, facing disproportionate poverty, unemployment, environmental degradation, health care gaps, violent crime, and discrimination. Against that backdrop, and consistent with the importance of this hearing today, I want to highlight the April 20 announcement by Ambassador Susan Rice, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN in New York, that the United States will review its position regarding the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Administration is committed to having the U.S. serve as a model in promoting and protecting human rights, which is why the State Department participated in a nationwide series of consultations with civil society representatives in preparation for our presentation in November in Geneva on our domestic human rights record, which will be part of the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review process. Two out of more than a dozen

listening sessions were held in Albuquerque, NM, and Window Rock, AZ, and focused on indigenous issues. In those sessions, and through other communications with Native American groups, we heard strongly that, for many, this Declaration provides a framework for addressing indigenous issues. As we undertake our review, we will consult extensively with federally recognized Indian tribes and reach out to other interested nongovernmental organizations. We also intend to keep the Commission, and Congress more generally, apprised of our progress.

MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENT

As part of our overall multilateral engagement strategy, we are working hard to ensure that UN bodies and other multilateral human rights institutions take indigenous rights seriously. Ambassador Rice's April 20 appearance at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was a signal of our commitment. Last summer, a State Department delegation participated in the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) for the first time and we intend to participate again this July. At the Human Rights Council in Geneva and at the UN General Assembly in New York, our negotiators pay particular attention to Indigenous Rights issues, and our goal is that UN action should focus on real-world improvements for vulnerable populations.

PROGRAMMATIC ASSISTANCE

You have heard from my USAID and Western Hemisphere bureau colleagues about the robust assistance efforts being implemented in Latin America. DRL is also actively engaged in programming to protect and support indigenous communities, with grants totaling \$1.9 million. In Bolivia, for example, DRL is working to provide indigenous Quechua and Chiquitano citizens with legal documentation to enable them to participate in elections and to exercise their civic rights. Through another grant, DRL provides psycho-social assistance to families of persons killed or disappeared as a result of internal conflict in Colombia, with a particular focus on vulnerable populations.

Although this hearing focuses on Latin America, I want to note that our efforts to promote the rights of indigenous people extend beyond the Western Hemisphere. In Burma, for instance, DRL programs work to build the capacity of Burmese ethnic minority organizations and individuals to investigate, document and report on human rights violations in their communities and become active supporters of democracy in Burma. In Iraq, a DRL grantee works with the indigenous Marsh Arab population in rural southern Iraq to raise awareness of their

heritage, to encourage active political and civic engagement, and to improve their access to state-provided education, health, and vocational services.

ENVIRONMENT, BUSINESS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

We are especially committed to promoting corporate social responsibility, particularly with extractive industries whose operations can so dramatically affect the living conditions of indigenous peoples. In our annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, we have in recent years increased efforts to highlight the link between human rights abuses and the lack of accountability surrounding the extraction of natural resources. One important multi-stakeholder initiative having direct bearing on extractive industries is the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights. In March, Assistant Secretary Posner traveled to London for the annual plenary meeting of the VPs, which coincided with the beginning of the United States' year-long chairmanship of the VPs Steering Committee. Our goal as chair is to lead a transformational process that strengthens the VPs as a results-oriented effort that delivers clear value for all participants and has greater impact on the ground.

Indigenous issues are cross-cutting, and involve more than just the Human Rights bureau. The Bureau of Oceans, Environment and Sciences organizes active

U.S. participation in the Arctic Council, where Arctic indigenous peoples -- represented by Permanent Participant organizations -- have a co-equal role.

CONCLUSION

Despite our efforts so far, the challenges faced by indigenous peoples remain. Sensible policies only arise from good information and close communication with affected groups, so I am eager to hear the views of the members of your second witness panel today, and particularly the representatives from indigenous communities in Peru, Panama, and Colombia.

I'd also like to mention how grateful we are that Professor Shelton is serving on the Inter American Court of Human Rights. As A/S Posner recently assured her, we look forward to supporting her efforts there.

In closing, let me once again thank you Mr. Chairman for your leadership on indigenous rights issues and for the dedication of all members of the Lantos Commission to protecting the world's most vulnerable groups. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.