

Statement for the Record

**Submitted to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission^[L]^[SEP]Hearing: Human Rights in
Venezuela: Status and Opportunity**

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Chair Smith, Chair McGovern and distinguished Members of the Commission:

Survival International appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement for the record on the human rights situation in Venezuela.

For more than fifty years, Survival International has worked alongside Indigenous peoples worldwide to defend their lands, lives, and right to self-determination. A central focus of our work is the protection of uncontacted Indigenous peoples - communities that deliberately avoid sustained contact with outsiders because history has shown that such contact often brings disease, violence, land theft, and cultural destruction.

As Venezuela seeks renewed international investment and economic engagement, the protection of Indigenous peoples—particularly those living in voluntary isolation—must be treated as a core human rights priority. While Venezuela’s political repression and humanitarian crisis rightly command international attention, one of the country’s most severe and least recognized human rights emergencies is unfolding in the Venezuelan Amazon. The rapid expansion of mining, combined with the absence of effective legal protections for Indigenous territories, is placing some of the world’s last uncontacted Indigenous peoples at existential risk.

Venezuela’s Uncontacted Indigenous Peoples:

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has reported evidence concerning Jödi (Hoti), Yanomami, and Uwottüja (Piaroa) groups living in relative isolation or initial contact in southern Venezuela and has warned that their territories are severely affected by illegal mining. More recent Indigenous-led research, reflected in Survival International’s 2025 global survey, identifies uncontacted Eñepá (Panare) groups as a fourth people. The available evidence therefore indicates the presence of uncontacted groups belonging to at least four Indigenous peoples:

- Jödi (Hoti);
- Uwottüja (Piaroa);
- Yanomami; and
- Eñepá (Panare).

Venezuela has not established a specific national legal and institutional protection regime for uncontacted peoples. It has also failed to complete the demarcation and effective protection of Indigenous territories required by Article 119 of the 1999 Constitution. More than twenty-five years later, this continuing territorial insecurity leaves Indigenous peoples exposed to miners, armed and criminal groups, traffickers, missionaries, and other outsiders. In these circumstances, concessions granted over titled, claimed, traditionally occupied, or otherwise used Indigenous lands and territories cannot be treated as legitimate.

Mining Has Become One of the Greatest Human Rights Threats:

Mining poses exceptional dangers for peoples living in voluntary isolation. Uncontacted peoples cannot participate in consultation processes, seek medical care, report abuses, or safely relocate once outsiders enter their territories.

Mining also extends far beyond extraction sites. Roads, airstrips, camps, fuel depots, and river transport corridors permanently open previously inaccessible forests, accelerating outside encroachment.

The consequences include:

- outbreaks of malaria, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases;
- mercury contamination of rivers and fisheries;
- expansion of armed groups and criminal networks;
- forced displacement;
- violence against Indigenous communities; and
- environmental destruction that undermines food security and traditional livelihoods.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has documented how mining affecting Yanomami territory has resulted in violence, disease, malnutrition, mercury contamination, forced displacement, and human trafficking. Survival International has likewise documented a humanitarian emergency among the Yanomami, including reports of more than 500 deaths in one region between 2022 and 2024 from malaria and other preventable diseases.

If these impacts are devastating for contacted Indigenous communities, they would almost certainly be catastrophic for peoples living in voluntary isolation.

U.S. Policy Shift and Investment Make These Risks More Urgent:

Recent policy developments significantly increase the urgency of these concerns.

Following changes in U.S. policy toward Venezuela, the United States has signaled support for renewed investment in Venezuela's mining sector. In March 2026, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued general licenses relating to Venezuelan-origin minerals, and Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum led a delegation of U.S. and international mining and finance companies to Caracas to promote investment in Venezuela's gold and critical minerals sectors.

At roughly the same time, Venezuela enacted a new mining law intended to encourage expanded investment.

Expanding mining under current conditions risks accelerating serious human rights abuses while exposing companies and investors to significant legal, financial, and reputational risks.

International Human Rights Standards:

International human rights bodies have consistently recognized that Indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation require the highest level of protection.

The IACHR and OHCHR have emphasized several core principles:

- respect for the decision of uncontacted peoples to remain isolated;
- protection of their territories through the precautionary principle;
- prevention of unwanted contact;
- legal recognition and protection of Indigenous lands; and
- protection from extractive activities that threaten their survival.

Because uncontacted peoples cannot provide Free, Prior and Informed Consent, governments have an affirmative obligation to prevent activities that create a foreseeable risk of irreversible harm.

These principles are especially relevant to mining, whose impacts routinely extend well beyond the boundaries of individual concessions.

Recommendations:

Survival International respectfully urges Congress and the Administration to ensure that Indigenous rights remain central to any future U.S. engagement with Venezuela.

Specifically, the United States should:

1. Condition support for mining investment on meaningful human rights protections.

Recognition and protection of Indigenous peoples must precede any U.S. investment or commercial engagement in Venezuela's mining sector. U.S. support for expanded mining investment - including financing, political risk insurance, technical assistance, or other forms of government support - should not proceed until Venezuela, at a minimum:

- formally recognizes uncontacted Indigenous peoples;
- establishes a national protection system for uncontacted Indigenous peoples;
- completes the demarcation and protection of Indigenous territories; and
- adopts enforceable safeguards that prevent irreversible harm before mining projects are authorized.

2. Require enhanced human rights due diligence.

U.S. companies, investors, lenders, and government agencies considering involvement in Venezuela's mining sector should conduct enhanced human rights due diligence consistent with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct.

3. Integrate Indigenous rights throughout U.S. policy toward Venezuela.

Indigenous rights protections should be incorporated into decisions regarding sanctions policy, economic engagement, reconstruction assistance, and critical minerals policy.

4. Support independent monitoring.

Congress should support independent monitoring by the United Nations, the Inter-American human rights system, Indigenous organizations, and Venezuelan civil society to assess the human rights and environmental impacts of mining.

5. Urge the Government of Venezuela to fulfill its constitutional obligations through bilateral diplomacy.

U.S. officials should consistently urge Venezuelan authorities to fulfill their constitutional obligation to demarcate Indigenous territories, formally recognize uncontacted Indigenous peoples, and protect Indigenous leaders and defenders from mining-related violence.

Conclusion:

The human rights crisis in Venezuela extends beyond political repression and humanitarian suffering. It also includes the rapid expansion of extractive industries into some of the most biologically and culturally important forests on Earth, placing uncontacted Indigenous peoples at unprecedented risk.

Once these communities lose control of their territories - or are subjected to unwanted contact - the consequences are often irreversible. Effective protection therefore requires preventive action before new mining investments proceed, not after harm has occurred.

As the United States considers a new phase of engagement with Venezuela, Congress has an opportunity to ensure that economic policy advances - not undermines - fundamental human rights. Economic development and respect for fundamental human rights are not mutually exclusive. Any future support for Venezuela's mining sector should be conditioned on meaningful protections for Indigenous peoples, including those whose survival depends upon secure territories and the right to remain uncontacted.

Survival International appreciates the Commission's attention to these critical issues and stands ready to assist the Commission in its ongoing efforts to advance human rights in Venezuela.