

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
The Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Americas

November 20, 2020 - 10:00 a.m.
Location: Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Statement of Leila Salazar-López
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Hello and thank you for the opportunity to speak before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the United States Congress on the topic of Indigenous peoples of the Americas on behalf of Amazon Watch.

And, thank you for the work you have done to uplift human rights and the rights of Indigenous peoples through the Commission and beyond. Thank you co-chairs Rep. Smith and Mc Govern for your consistent advocacy for human rights over the years.

Rep. Mc Govern, your work has extended to some of our longstanding Indigenous partners, including U'wa leaders from Colombia who you met with 10 years ago and immediately raised concerns about their case with the Colombian Ambassador.

Rep. Haaland, it is with utmost respect that I address you today. I want to express my deepest gratitude for your leadership in uplifting and defending the rights of Indigenous peoples from the United States to the Amazon and specifically for hosting the ¹delegation of Brazilian congresswomen in February, including Joenia Wapichana, the first Indigenous woman elected to the Brazilian Parliament, as she expressed concerns about the growing threats against Indigenous peoples, the Amazon rainforest and democracy in Brazil.

For over 500 years of colonization, the rights, lives and lands of Indigenous peoples across the Americas have been, and continue to be, exploited. The Amazon region is no exception.

¹<https://amazonwatch.org/news/2020/0309-international-womens-day-alliance-of-indigenous-legislators-from-brazil-and-the-us>

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Covering an area the size of the continental United States, the Amazon is the world's largest and most biodiverse tropical rainforest on our planet. It is home to at least 400 distinct Indigenous peoples' nationalities who protect and defend it, but they are under a sustained assault by entrenched political and economic interests who seek to destroy the forest for "development."

The Amazon and its people are in a state of emergency and dangerously close to an ecological tipping point due to unprecedented fires, rampant deforestation, land-grabbing, extractive industries including oil and mining, agribusiness expansion, attacks against land defenders, and now the COVID-19 pandemic.

Important facts to consider about the Amazon Emergency:

- Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has surged nearly 30%, since Jair Bolsonaro took office in January 2019. This is mostly caused by illegal logging and fires set by loggers and developers.
- Extraordinarily, the annual "Burning Season" which shocked the world's conscience last year has proven even worse in 2020. **Fires in the Brazilian Amazon were up 30% in October** compared to last year. And, according to INPE (Brazil's National Institute for Space Research) data, fires have increased 20% in the Amazon from Jan. 1 to Nov. 12, compared with the same period a year ago - the highest rate in a decade." (Reuters).
- **Amazon fires this year are seriously threatening Indigenous territories in which isolated uncontacted Indigenous groups make their homes.** Brazil has an estimated 100+ isolated Indigenous groups living within its borders, more than any other Amazonian nation.
- **Let me be clear: the fires raging in the Amazon are not wildfires.** They are a result of wide-scale deforestation and criminal arson encouraged by systemic racism, government rhetoric and development policies that incentivize land grabbing, human rights violations and environmental destruction for profit by companies and investors, including the U.S. financial industry.
- Last month, we released a report together with APIB (Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil) entitled, ²["Complicity in Destruction III: How global corporations enable violations of Indigenous peoples' rights in the Brazilian Amazon](https://amazonwatch.org/news/2020/1027-american-financiers-invested-billion-in-companies-linked-to-indigenous-rights-violations) where we identified six major U.S.-based financial Institutions – BlackRock, Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, Vanguard, Bank of America, and Dimensional Fund Advisors – that from 2017 to 2020 invested more than US\$18 billion dollars in nine companies enabling environmental and Indigenous rights violations. The report documents how three Brazilian economic sectors

²<https://amazonwatch.org/news/2020/1027-american-financiers-invested-billion-in-companies-linked-to-indigenous-rights-violations>

– mining, agribusiness, and energy – have driven conflicts with Amazonian Indigenous peoples in recent years.

- In 2020, Amazon Watch has published three reports illustrating the investments that U.S.-based investment firms like BlackRock, State Street, CitiGroup and JPMorganChase have in fossil fuels, mining, agribusiness and other corporations that are contributing to deforestation and Indigenous rights abuses across the Amazon.
- In July, we released a report that revealed ³[European Banks Financing Trade of Controversial Amazon Oil to U.S.](https://amazonwatch.org/news/2020/0812-new-report-reveals-european-banks-financing-trade-of-controversial-amazon-oil-to-us) and in March we released ⁴[Investing in Amazon Crude: The Network of Global Financiers and Oil Companies Driving the Amazon Toward Collapse](https://amazonwatch.org/news/2020/0312-investing-in-amazon-crude). In 2020, Amazon Watch has published three reports illustrating the investments that U.S.-based investment firms like BlackRock, State Street, CitiGroup and JPMorganChase have in fossil fuels, mining, agribusiness and other corporations that are contributing to deforestation and Indigenous rights abuses across the Amazon. In the past three years alone, these five financial institutions have made available tens of billions of dollars for oil companies operating in the Amazon, including GeoPark, Amerisur, Frontera, and Andes Petroleum.
- Indigenous and traditional forest peoples, including *ribeirinhos* and *quilombolas*, are widely known as the best guardians of the forest and biodiversity, yet their lives are increasingly at risk due to land-invasions by colonists, drug traffickers, and corporate interests.
- According to ⁵Global Witness, **Latin America is the most dangerous place in the world for land and environmental defenders.** ²/₃ of the 212 defenders killed in 2019 were in Latin America, 33 were in the Amazon and 90% of the deaths in Brazil occurred in the Amazon. ⁶Paulo Paulino Guajajara, was attacked and killed while defending ancestral territory and isolated peoples in Brazil last year in Brazil. In April, ⁷Arbildo Meléndez, Cacataibo Indigenous leader from the Peruvian Amazon, was murdered after receiving death threats from land-grabbers and narco-traffickers who wanted to control the same territory.

³<https://amazonwatch.org/news/2020/0812-new-report-reveals-european-banks-financing-trade-of-controversial-amazon-oil-to-us>

⁴ <https://amazonwatch.org/news/2020/0312-investing-in-amazon-crude>

⁵<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/global-witness-records-the-highest-number-of-land-and-environmental-activists-murdered-in-one-year-with-the-link-to-accelerating-climate-change-of-increasing-concern/#:~:text=Wednesday%2029%20July%202020%20%E2%80%93%20Global,to%20the%20destruction%20of%20nature>

⁶<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://amazonwatch.org/news/2019/1101-indigenous-forest-guardian-murdered-by-illegal-loggers-in-brazilian-amazon&sa=D&ust=1605908654517000&usg=AOvVaw09Ydcf3ku2pCDEy9-0f1wh>

⁷<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://amazonwatch.org/news/2020/0506-justice-for-arbildo&sa=D&ust=1605908654518000&usg=AOvVaw0OwFKyFslAUltnsHReS0sA>

- **The COVID-19 pandemic has created a humanitarian crisis across the Amazon basin** with over 1.4 million confirmed cases and over 35,000 deaths throughout the region according to ⁸REPAM and COICA (as of 11/16/2020). Of those confirmed, ⁹over 73,000 are Indigenous peoples. At least 2,100 people from 238 nationalities have died, many of them are the elders and wisdomkeepers who hold vast knowledge our world desperately needs at this time. COVID-19 is spreading exponentially into remote communities threatening ethnocide of Indigenous peoples if immediate and ongoing action is not taken.
- Due to all of these combined threats, **the Amazon rainforest is reaching an ecological tipping point** that must be avoided at all costs to avoid further climate chaos.

Considering the multiple crises facing the Amazon and the violations of human rights of Indigenous peoples today, it is critical that urgent action be taken to stop further destruction and uphold and advance Indigenous rights as enshrined in law, including the UN Declaration of Indigenous Peoples.

The most effective solution to protecting the Amazon is to respect and uphold Indigenous rights and sovereignty; protect and defend lives and territories, and; support and amplify Indigenous-led solutions for forest conservation, sustainable livelihoods and regenerative local economies.

Indigenous peoples across the region continue to organize in defense of their rights, lives and territories in spite of the onslaught of assaults. When they organize, they win, as in the case of the Achuar and Wampis Peoples of the Peruvian Amazon who have successfully expelled multiple international oil companies from their territories over the last decade.

Indigenous women defenders are leading locally, regionally and internationally. They are on the frontlines of the multiple crises facing the Amazon, from historic oil spills and floods to COVID-19, and are resolute in protecting their children, communities and rainforest territories for our collective future. Their leadership is increasingly being recognized amplified internationally, including: Sonia Guajajara and APIB received the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award by the Institute for Policy Studies, Alessandra Munduruku (Munduruku People of the Brazilian Amazon) received the RFK Human Rights Award, and Nemonte Nenquimo (Waorani of Ecuadorian Amazon) was recognized as one of Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential people.

⁸<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://redamazonica.org/covid-19-panamazonia/&sa=D&ust=1605908654518000&usg=AOvVaw0bz-ndZ73N6dE15n9NF19M>

⁹https://www.google.com/url?q=http://bit.ly/covid19-Amaozonia&sa=D&ust=1605908654519000&usg=AOvVaw2RS9C_1VUPXayWxSALxUPV

Recommendations to the U.S. Congress

In terms of what the U.S. Congress should be doing to support Indigenous rights in the Amazon and around the region, the demands of Indigenous peoples should be at the forefront.

In regards to the Brazilian Amazon, I would highlight a recent statement led by APIB and endorsed by 60 organizations, including Amazon Watch, which outlined ¹⁰five emergency measures to fight the deforestation crisis in the Amazon.

These measures include: a multi-year moratorium on any deforestation in the Amazon, an increase in environmental enforcement and fines, an increase in legal demarcation of Indigenous and *Quilombola* Afro-Brazilian territories, and a strengthening of the environmental enforcement agencies like IBAMA.

Reviewing each of these kinds of measures, there are political, financial, and technical resources that the U.S. Congress could advocate for and appropriate.

I also want to underscore the importance of an approach to foreign policy that centers human rights concerns. Human rights considerations should be priorities in different aspects of policy, including Free Trade Agreements, military relations, support channeled through the US Agency for International Development, support channeled through multilateral financial institutions like the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

Specifically, we encourage Members of the House to take the following actions:

One, endorse the ¹¹Amazon Climate Platform. Key aspects of the Platform include:

- Supporting supply chains and financial portfolios free of deforestation and fossil fuels (See ¹²Amsterdam Declarations Partnership letter as an example);
- Halting deforestation and destruction of the Amazon Biome
- Upholding the collective and territorial rights of Indigenous Peoples
- Defending Environmental Defenders
- Supporting Land Restoration Efforts

¹⁰<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://amazonwatch.org/news/2020/0806-more-than-60-ngos-demand-moratorium-on-deforestation-in-the-brazilian-amazon&sa=D&ust=1605908654515000&usg=AOvVaw1ojFih8SrSw89oef7dYIQ>

¹¹https://www.google.com/url?q=https://amazonclimateplatform.org/&sa=D&ust=1605908654521000&usg=AOvVaw3fUpY3aWWgHEQGK5H_I6AB

¹²https://www.google.com/url?q=https://ad-partnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ADP-Brazil-Open-letter_EN.pdf&sa=D&ust=1605908654522000&usg=AOvVaw0mSPQql9XrtFH_ZgGSJa0Q

Two, advocate for the protection of threatened Indigenous Forest Guardians and earth defenders. Actions here can include:

- Encouraging the incoming Biden Administration to prioritize human rights protection in its foreign policy toward Amazonian countries
- Continue to raise concerns collectively through Dear Colleague letters
- Speak out publicly through social media and statements to the press, especially when defenders are under heightened risk and can use the international exposure for protection.

Three, support financial regulation of U.S. based financial institutions that are currently bankrolling the destruction of the Amazon.

- Raise concerns directly with U.S. based corporations and investment firms
- Pass legislation
- Encourage executive action through the Treasury Department and SEC

I would like to close with the words of Sonia Guajajara, Executive Coordinator of APIB, Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, who says *“The Amazon is on fire, putting Indigenous lives, biodiversity, and the global climate at great risk. If we lose the Amazon, we lose the fight against climate change. We know that fires are also raging in California and other places around the world and express our solidarity. Indigenous peoples know, and have been saying for quite some time, that everything in this life is interconnected. When you destroy Mother Earth in one place, every part of the world feels this destruction.”*

Thank you once again for the invitation to speak and I look forward to any questions you might have.