



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

The Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Americas

Friday, November 20, 2020

10:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon

Virtual via Cisco WebEx

**Rep. Deb Haaland
TLHRC Executive Committee Member**

As prepared for delivery

Thank you, Chairman McGovern and Chairman Smith. I'm very appreciative of the work you have both led in this space. I am not alone in saying, your tireless efforts to raise these human rights issues has made an impact. And I'm happy to be here with you today to fight for marginalized groups. Thank you.

I'd also like to recognize Kim Stanton, the Democratic Staff Director, for all of the tremendous work she's put into ensuring today's event is successful. Thank you, Kim.

As a member of Laguna Pueblo and one of the first of two indigenous women elected to Congress, I am honored to be a part of this important discussion.

As one of a growing population of Indigenous leaders around the world, it's important that we share our lived experience as an Indigenous person.

It's an extraordinary time for indigenous people. New Zealand recently appointed the nation's first Indigenous woman to the role of Minister of Foreign Affairs, signaling their recognition of indigenous contributions to society and the inspiring impact of having a Māori voice lead international affairs.

Last year, I had the distinct honor of hosting a delegation of Brazilian Congresswoman to Washington, DC. Among this group of human rights leaders was Joenia Wapixana—the first Indigenous woman elected to Brazil’s Chamber of Deputies.

She told me amazing stories of environmental protection, of workers’ rights, indigenous rights and Afro-Brazilian rights. We learned from each other through our intercultural discourse and continue to build a dialogue of power, strength and bravery.

Again, it is an extraordinary time for indigenous leaders and indigenous people around the world.

As many of you are aware, November is Native American Heritage month. It is a time to celebrate the rich and diverse cultures, traditions and history of Native people. It is also a time for us to reflect on the failure of the United States government to uphold its trust responsibility to Native Nations.

Native Americans have overcome many hardships since the onset of colonization, including federally mandated genocide and devastating federal policies including the assimilation and removal eras. While we still strive to hold the U.S. government accountable for its broken promises, we can celebrate the resilience and contributions of Native people.

Though our history on this land has been complex, we must draw on our past experiences—the abuses we’ve endured & obstacles we’ve overcome—and our present day influence within our free and Democratic nation, to address the grave environmental and human rights crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean.

According to the World Bank, Indigenous people make up 8% of the population in Latin America, yet they disproportionately represent 14% of the poor and 17% of the extremely poor.

In 2015, the Colombian government announced the establishment of the Truth Commission to pursue truth and to commit to peace and coexistence. This decree gave hope to the Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations who have suffered from many years of violence and displacement. Regrettably, the government has not fulfilled their agreement, which has perpetuated the persecution and murder of indigenous leaders who attempt to affirm their right to their land and culture.

In Brazil, President Bolsonaro and his allies continue to side with industry interests when it comes to mining, farming and infrastructure projects, which have led to violent attacks against indigenous peoples.

Under his leadership, the Brazilian government continues to make attempts to legitimize the theft of constitutionally protected Indigenous lands.

Their proposed regulations exacerbate climate change and threaten the human rights, livelihoods and cultural survival of indigenous peoples within the Amazon and in urban areas.

And this pandemic has only intensified the marginalization these communities face—making it far more difficult for indigenous people to gain access to basic services, medical care and technology.

In Bolivia, protected indigenous territories cover approximately 52% of the Amazon rainforest. Despite these communities conserving the biodiversity and resources in this area with great care, their land and way of life is under attack.

Elsewhere in Bolivia, far right officials have levied harmful anti-Indigenous rhetoric and state violence towards protestors, Indigenous and Afro-Bolivian groups.

In Guatemala, food security and poverty continue to be a major concern among indigenous families. As a country ravaged by extreme climate and weather events— ranking ninth in the world for level of risk to the effects of climate change—our support in addressing this is of the utmost importance. The fact that 58% of indigenous children suffer from chronic malnutrition and stunting effects should cause pause in all of us.

These are not isolated incidences... Throughout the Americas, we witness similar stories of discrimination, oppression, and social-environmental conflict affecting up to 50 million indigenous lives.

Though there is much reform needed, I remain hopeful thanks to the impactful grass roots activism and on-going support from federal and Non-Government organizations within the US and internationally.

We've seen poverty rates of indigenous households decrease in countries like Peru, Bolivia and Chile and educational gaps closed for indigenous children in Ecuador and Nicaragua, largely due to the work many of you here today participate in.

Thank you to our panelists, and many of our viewers who've dedicated their time and resources to tackling these tough issues.

Over the past 20 years our collective commitment and strategic multilateral efforts on these matters has made a tremendous impact for Indigenous lives around the world.

I look forward to hearing from our panel of experts and learning more about policy solutions that support indigenous communities and tribes in the Americas.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to my staff on ways I can help. I remain committed to defending indigenous rights and amplifying the significant impact indigenous people have on our culture, conservation efforts and climate change.

Thank you.