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**CONGRESSWOMAN SHEILA JACKSON LEE OF
TEXAS**

**TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
VIRTUAL HEARING
STATEMENT**

**“THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
IN THE AMERICAS”**

**FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2020
10:00 AM EDT
WEBEX**



- First and foremost, I want to thank our Co-Chairs McGovern and Smith as well as Congresswoman Haaland for hosting this important hearing today, so that we may discuss the status of human rights of Indigenous peoples in the Americas.

- I would also like to welcome and thank the six witnesses for being here today and participating in this vital conversation.
 - Leila Salazar-López, Executive Director, Amazon Watch;
 - Keith Slack, Director of Strategic Impact and Campaigns, EarthRights International;
 - Melania Canales Poma, President, Organización Nacional de Mujeres Andinas y Amazónicas del Perú, ONAMIAP (Quechua);
 - Leonardo A. Crippa, Senior Lawyer, Indian Law Resource Center (Kolla);
 - Jolie Schwarz, Policy Director, Bank Information Center; and
 - Brian Keane, Chair, Land Is Life, and former USAID Advisor on Indigenous People’s Issues for U.S. Foreign Assistance (2013-2019).

- While there is currently no single, widely accepted definition of Indigenous peoples due to the diversity of these groups, the United Nations (U.N.) describes them as “inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and the environment” who “have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live.”

- In Latin America alone, Indigenous groups represent over 800 ethnic groups and 500 languages.

- Despite the incredible differences and diversity among Indigenous communities, they continue to face similar global threats and injustices, many of which have been well documented throughout history and persist still today.

- In fact, numerous Indigenous communities suffer from:

- High rates of poverty;
 - Poor health outcomes;
 - Lack of access to education and quality health care;
 - An inability to obtain land titles of control the use or protection of natural resources located in their territories;
 - The killing of Indigenous social leaders, particularly environmental activists;
 - Substantial vulnerability to the impacts of climate change; and
 - The destruction of their territories due to illegal logging and mining.
- It is no secret that these injustices are the direct result of centuries long practices of ignoring the basic human rights of Indigenous people, culminating in widespread discrimination and marginalization, which further poses significant risk of Indigenous groups being victims to violence and other abuses.
 - Despite only representing 5% of the world's population, Indigenous persons account for 15% of people who live in extreme poverty.
 - Furthermore, they are almost twice as likely as non-Indigenous people to be poor.
 - In Guatemala, up to 70% of Indigenous children are stunted due to malnutrition.
 - In Colombia, 242 Indigenous leaders have been assassinated since the signing of the peace accords in 2016, including the 47 individuals who were killed between January and June of 2020.
 - Furthermore, as people all over the world address the challenges posed by COVID-19, we are also confronted with the reality of startling disparities that disproportionately affect already marginalized and disadvantaged communities.

- In fact, there is longstanding precedent for public health crises disproportionately impacting Indigenous communities.
- The COVID-19 epidemic is no different.
- This pandemic has exacerbated the risks Indigenous people already face, highlighting barriers to quality healthcare, education, and a lack of access to essential services, sanitation, and other key preventive measures, such as clean water, soap, and disinfectant.
- As of November 16, 2020, more than 39,000 Indigenous people from 161 ethnic groups have reportedly been infected and nearly 900 have died from COVID-19 in Brazil.
- Yet, the disproportionately high susceptibility to COVID-19 is not the only concern facing Indigenous communities in the Americas.
- Throughout this pandemic, there have been several instances of outside groups using the chaos created by the coronavirus to further subvert the rights of Indigenous peoples.
- For example, in Brazil, the uncontrolled deforestation is decimating Indigenous communities as land invasions and environmental crimes appear to have increased as the pandemic has forced the Brazilian government to scale back its already limited enforcement operations.
- In Peru, Honduras and several other countries, extractive industries located in or near Indigenous territories are provoking an increasing number of environmental, social and ethnic conflicts, despite growing recognition of the contributions of Indigenous peoples to resource conservation and the management of climate change.

- In Colombia, human rights observatories have noted a significant rise in violence towards Indigenous leaders as the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a seven-month lockdown, thereby preventing the Colombian National Protection Unit from convening risk assessments and further hampered investigations, leaving attacks to go unpunished.
- I believe that the United States has a moral duty to the world to not only condemn violations of human rights but to also speak up for the voiceless and the vulnerable at every opportunity, so that we can collectively work towards a more equitable, dignified, peaceful, and just society for all.
- As a fierce champion for human rights and an advocate for Indigenous communities across the world, I am honored to be a part of this hearing and to hear recommendations from our panelists on what Congress can do to be a better ally to Indigenous groups everywhere.
- Once again, I wish to thank the Commission's Co-Chairs, Congressmen McGovern and Smith, and Congresswoman Haaland for today's hearing, and I look forward to hearing from the witnesses.