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## Human Rights Council

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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 August 2017]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## Marginalization of indigenous peoples in Venezuela

The severe economic and social crisis Venezuela is facing is particularly affecting the most vulnerable: indigenous people. The country has a large variety of groups that call themselves indigenous. A part of them has migrated to the cities for economic reasons. Others live in isolated rural areas. In the history of Venezuelan politics, a lot of promises concerning indigenous rights had been made. Institutions were created as well as laws and social programs. But what had been promising in the beginning, turned out to be a mere symbolic step that lacked political motivation, money or was put on ice due to the crisis. Overall, the large number of offices and agencies haven't been effective. Firstly because they do not form a coherent organization, secondly because native people are being treated according to how society sees them and not how they identify themselves.

### Land ownership

The already existing laws for the demarcation and titling of indigenous lands have had only limited impact so far. The inefficiency of the process of demarcation can be explained with internal problems within the administration. Since 2009 the process is blocked due to the crisis. Before that the demarcation and titling procedure had to be initiated by the indigenous people themselves. They are neither trained nor financed by the state to go through the process. That's why indigenous people don't always succeed. However, they depend on their land. Not only to sustain their traditional live, but also to protect their land from exploitation. For them their territory is linked to their culture. It also gives them the opportunity to follow economic activities like agriculture and tourism. There are many social conflicts over land ownership today. Some people cannot even access their land due to conflicts with their neighbors.

### Participation in the political process

Organizations created and controlled by indigenous people do not exist at the moment. The model of communal councils often clash with their system of traditional authorities. Defenders of indigenous rights are being criminalized and indigenous people in the opposition suffer repression from the regime. In summary, it can be said that native people can only participate in the political process up to a degree that has been set by the government.

Programs that were created to tackle indigenous issues mostly focus on development aid. Yet they don't fight the causes of poverty, but make people more dependent on the state. There have been several financial cuts due to recent developments. Because of that the living conditions of native groups have gotten worse. To give an example, the Warao tribe had to migrate from Venezuela to northern Brazil, because they were lacking basic products and food.

### Healthcare

Besides the economic and social crisis Venezuela is facing a severe public health crisis as well. Especially in rural parts of the country, but also in the cities, supply of medical equipment, doctors and medication is insufficient. Vast inequalities in access to healthcare can be identified between indigenous and non-indigenous people. Government figures show that the average life expectancy of members of the Warao tribe is 20 years below the national average. Native communities often suffer from diseases and epidemics like HIV/Aids, malaria, Zika, skin diseases, pneumonia or tuberculosis. So far, 20 deaths from HIV and Aids occurring among indigenous peoples in the municipalities of Antonio Díaz and San Francisco de Guayo have been reported. Another problem is malnutrition. 2016 the *Comisión para los Derechos Humanos del Estado de Zulia* (CODHEZ) reported 12 cases of malnourished children in Guajira at the border to Columbia. In Zulia State, which is also at the Columbian border, 160 cases of malaria among the Wayuu tribe have been reported.

Overall, necessary emergency measures are not being taken, which widens the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous people regarding their access to healthcare even more.

### Education

The education system in Venezuela fails to include indigenous people. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) submitted a report on education and indigenous people in 2014. It states among other things that Venezuela is one of the countries in Latin America with the widest gap between indigenous and non-indigenous people regarding education. For instance, the illiteracy rate is higher among indigenous people than it is among non-indigenous people. On average, young native people study two to four years less than others. Less money has been invested in building and maintaining schools in indigenous communities. A lot of times, students aren't attending school because they are in poor health or have other obligations.

### **Security and territorial integrity**

Many projects have been threatening the territorial integrity of indigenous peoples. The economic model of Venezuela is based on the extraction of natural resources, a lot of which can be found on indigenous lands. Native people have the right to obtain information and be consulted, but this has been ignored many times. The *Arco Minero del Orinoco* mining project is one of many examples. The Mapoyo, Eñepá, Kariña, Arawak, Akawako, Yekwana, Sanema and Pemoó tribes haven't been consulted, although some of these groups hold an official ownership title. These will be violated if the project is implemented. Moreover, it was approved without any assessment on environmental and cultural impact. This and other extractive projects threaten the health and traditional lifestyle of indigenous people. In the state of Zulia more coal mines are planned. Due to protests the planning process came to a halt, but the project is not officially stopped yet.

Another security issue is the militarization of whole areas due to illegal trafficking activities at the border. In the municipality of Guajira, human rights of Wayúu, Yukpa, Barí and Añú people are being violated by authorities that claim to protect them. Indigenous people are being restricted in their mobility and face discrimination and racism. The *Comisión para los Derechos Humanos del Estado de Zulia* (CODHEZ) reports 22 deaths, 45 injured people, 19 victims of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatments, one person illegally confined, one person that disappeared and hundreds of cases of arbitrary detention. In the Amazonian forest, in the states near the border to Brazil, in Delta Amacuro and at the Atlantic coast, indigenous communities are suffering under threats and violence by gangs that are involved in illegal mining. In February 2017 Juan Gabriel González, a member of the Pemón tribe received death threats by one of these gangs. On top of that, cases of sexual abuse were reported. Mercury which is being used by these miners, pollutes the local water sources that provide the communities with drinking water. Despite this worrying situation, the government hasn't taken any measures to end illegal mining.

### **Society for Threatened Peoples calls upon the members of the United Nations Human Rights Council to urge the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to:**

- 1) respect and implement indigenous rights that have been set up so far. The government needs to allow international supervisors to check on the status of human rights in Venezuela.
- 2) reactivate the process of demarcation and titling of indigenous lands. Information about this process needs to be provided as well as a bigger budget to go through the procedure. The government needs to develop conflict resolution strategies in order to resolve territorial conflicts.
- 3) promote political participation of indigenous people in grassroots organizations. Traditional indigenous authorities need to be recognized and included into the political process to gain more legitimacy and influence.
- 4) provide healthcare for every indigenous person. Especially in rural areas the access to healthcare needs to be reinforced.
- 5) provide education for indigenous people including bilingual and cultural education. More indigenous as well as non-indigenous teachers need to be trained in order to give all people of Venezuela proper education and equal opportunities.
- 6) respect the territorial integrity of indigenous peoples. Companies that plan to extract resources on indigenous land need to obtain their consent before they start a project.
- 7) end illegal mining that threatens the safety of indigenous communities.

