



**Statement of
Dr. Albert Kwokwo Barume
Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
At the
United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 24th Session**

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Chairperson of the Permanent Forum,
Chairperson et members of the Expert Mechanism,
Distinguished Members of the Permanent Forum,
Assistant-Secretary-General for Human Rights,
Indigenous Peoples' representatives,
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to address the Permanent Forum and all those attending the interactive dialogue on the human rights situation of Indigenous Peoples today.

I wish this dialogue could take place during the first week of the Permanent Forum, as done before, when most participants are still in New York, a city whose high cost of living cannot be afforded by many Indigenous Peoples for 2 weeks. I look forward to coordinating and collaborating with you, to seek complementarity and synergies of actions, and to further explore how to best organise the human rights dialogue with the Special Rapporteur - within the broader agenda of the Forum, to ensure it occurs during the first week for more inclusive participation.

My Statement is constituted of two sections, the first one giving a short presentation of the mandate and the second giving an overview of the human rights situation of Indigenous Peoples.

I. Overview of the SRIP mandate

As you will know, I took on the mandate as Special Rapporteur four months ago, in January 2025. In my view, the mandate is designed to amplify the voices of Indigenous Peoples, to convey their claims and concerns and to insist that States comply with their international human rights obligations.

The mandate of the Special Rapporteur translates into 4 main pillars of work:

- **Thematic reports.** The Special Rapporteur will prepare two reports every year, one for the General Assembly and one for the Human Rights Council.
- **Official country visits**, which require a government invitation or acceptance of a request, result in an in-depth report with recommendations to Governments and other duty-bearers on how to realize Indigenous Peoples' rights in that particular country.
- **Communications**, which is the process of raising specific cases or situations of alleged violations of Indigenous Peoples' rights with States and other actors, and finally:
- **Other mandated areas**, such as capacity-building, academic visits, technical assistance and advise, among others.

Thematic studies

This year, my **thematic study to the General Assembly** will focus on demarcation and registration of Indigenous Peoples' lands. This study does not seek to focus on the legal foundations of

Indigenous Peoples' rights to their lands, territories and resources; rather, it aims to take stock of States practices with a view to capturing lessons, trends, and good practices that could advance the implementation of the UN Declaration at country level.

The contributions received so far emphasize the importance of protecting Indigenous lands to preserve cultural heritage and to maintain ecological balance and biodiversity. They confirm that identifying, demarcating, registering, and titling lands is necessary, to effectively protect land rights and prevent dispossession. There are still shortcomings in legal frameworks and institutional arrangements, and thus a need for reforms. Other obstacles are lack of political will, economic pressures, cultural misunderstandings and insecurity.

Free, prior, and informed consent, as well as participation in decision-making, are needed to ensure that laws, policies, and practices align with Indigenous Peoples' needs and perspectives. Gender issues are highlighted, as Indigenous women must have equal rights and participation in land governance.

Given the importance of this topic, I am considering to produce an interim report this year and a final report next year after holding regional consultations with Indigenous Peoples.

My **thematic report to the Human Rights Council** this year will focus on the duty of States to recognize Indigenous Peoples as rights holders. A State cannot possibly implement rights if it has not first identified the holders of the concerned rights.

The study will stress the obligation for States, as the primary duty-bearers for human rights, to identify and recognise the Indigenous Peoples within the national territories, jurisdiction or areas of control. However, recognising Indigenous Peoples is not defining them or setting conditions for them to become Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration states that "Indigenous peoples have the right to determine their own identity or membership in accordance with their customs and traditions"

The contributions received so far reveal that while many countries have taken important steps to recognize Indigenous Peoples and their rights through constitutional reforms, national legislation, and international commitments, processes for recognition are often slow, inconsistent, and marked by significant legal and bureaucratic hurdles. Furthermore, challenges to full recognition persist, including political resistance, economic interests in Indigenous territories, and fears from State authorities that Indigenous status might impair their stability or development. While recognition frameworks have produced positive results, they have also exposed gaps, including selective recognition and exclusion of some Indigenous groups.

The study will also highlight the risks associated with - and technical reasons against - the conflation of Indigenous Peoples with other groups, such as local communities. Given its specific remedial purpose, the international human rights regime for Indigenous Peoples cannot

be simply extended to other groups. There is a need for clear distinctions that respect Indigenous Peoples' unique legal status under international law.

For these two reports, I have received over 100 submissions from States, Indigenous Peoples, NGOs, UN agencies, and other stakeholders. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all States, Indigenous Peoples, UN agencies and civil society for contributing to my thematic reports to be presented this year.

Country visits

Country visits used to be the backbone of the Special Rapporteur's mandate, with the possibility of undertaking several such visits every year. This opportunity has gradually been limited, given the underfunding of the human rights system.

As Special Rapporteur, I sent out almost 10 country visit requests; and I followed-up bilateral meetings with Permanent Missions in Geneva and New York. To date, I have received only one positive response from the Government of Botswana, for a visit in the second half of 2025.

I want to thank the Government of Botswana for extending the invitation for such a visit, and I look forward to working with both the Government and Indigenous Peoples to make a concrete contribution to the ongoing process of realising the rights of the Indigenous Peoples in that country. I take this opportunity to call upon other States to continue offering the Special Rapporteur the opportunity to have first-hand experience of the human rights situation of Indigenous Peoples at country level.

I would also like to reemphasise the decline in financial resources available for human rights mechanisms in general, and those on Indigenous Peoples in particular. In 2024, my predecessor was unable to conduct a second country visit due to a lack of financial resources; and the same is likely for me this year (2025). Moreover, since last year, my predecessor and I have been participating in this Forum thanks to non-UN funding, despite the participation of the Special Rapporteur at the Forum's sessions being mandated in the HRC's Resolution. As I emphasize later in this statement, the current global context makes it imperative to reinvest in human rights and its mechanisms in order to increase the chances of maintaining the norms-bound international order.

Communications

Sending communications is the way the Special Rapporteur can raise specific cases or situations of alleged violations of Indigenous Peoples' rights with governments and other duty-bearers. This is a particular feature of the mandate, and I intend to make it a robust and responsive core pillar of my work.

To make this happen, I will work closely with the dedicated staff in the OHCHR but also with an external support team to address as many cases as possible. Although not every allegation made will

result in a communication, I want to ensure that most claimant will receive an acknowledgement letter, confirming the issue was relayed to my mandate.

II. Overview of the human rights situation of Indigenous Peoples globally

I would like to address the human rights situation on three key points:

- Criminalisation of Indigenous Peoples
- Global context for human rights
- An overview of what I have heard from Indigenous Peoples so far.

II.1. Criminalisation of Indigenous Peoples and reprisals against Indigenous human rights defenders

The criminalization of Indigenous Peoples continues to grow. Whether in Latin America, Asia, Africa, or everywhere else, individuals and entire Indigenous Nations claiming their rights are labelled as enemies or threats to States and investments.

Indigenous People are frequently arrested, detained, sentenced, and even killed. The 2023/2024 Front Line Report indicates that 13% of the human rights defenders killed in 2023 were Indigenous peoples. This is alarmingly disproportionate considering that Indigenous Peoples represent around 5% of the World's population.

I am particularly concerned about the labelling of Indigenous Peoples as “terrorists”, “extremists”, or “enemies of States”. This reflects a triple victimisation of Indigenous Peoples. First, Indigenous Peoples in remote areas are victims of State neglect; secondly, they become victims of occupation by extremist groups, insurgents, or criminal gangs; thirdly, they become victims of criminalization by the State.

My call is for States to change the paradigm and see the opportunity to work with Indigenous Peoples as partners for peace and international security. There is potential in building on Indigenous Peoples' rights to self-determination and work with them as partners to address and counter extremism, radicalism, and criminal networks. Indigenous Peoples' detailed traditional knowledge of terrains and the resilience of their traditional institutions are untapped potentials for the protection of territories. Indigenous Peoples could become the FIRST LINE of international security and diplomacy infrastructure. I call for a Security Council's Resolution on Indigenous Peoples and international security, with a particular attention to Indigenous women and girls. After all, the UN Declaration was adopted to positively reshape the relationship between States and Indigenous Peoples.

II.2. Human rights concerns raised to the UN Special Rapporteur

Since my appointment, I have devoted my time to hearing from Indigenous Peoples in different regions of the World. I took part in a global Webinar organized by IITC in January 2025, in the Indigenous Peoples Forum organized by IFAD in Rome in February 2025; I participated in a preparatory meeting of Indigenous Peoples' organizations of Asia organized by AIPP in Thailand in February 2025; and also participated in a regional meeting with Indigenous Peoples of Africa in Nairobi, Kenya in March 2025; I undertook an awareness-raising tour in several cities of Australia organized by FAIRA in March 2025; I have participated in several other online meetings organised by various Indigenous organisations. I thank all the organizations that facilitated these encounters.

These meetings have been instrumental in identifying the worrying human rights situations that I will now share here with you.

Conflict and insecurity:

- Indigenous Peoples affected by conflicts and insecurity
- Indigenous Peoples in displacements from their lands and in refugee camps

Extractive industries and green transition:

- The scramble for critical or transition minerals in disregard of Indigenous Peoples' rights to lands, territories and resources.
- Deep concerns over the waste of extractives industries, including chemicals, that are contaminating and poisoning Indigenous Peoples' lands, waters and livelihoods
- Carbon projects on Indigenous Peoples' lands and territories in disregards of their rights and international standards protecting Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous Peoples in isolation:

- The dire and urgent need for protection of Indigenous Peoples in voluntary isolation and initial contact

Detention and criminal age:

- The continuing disproportionate high percentage of Indigenous Peoples in detention in numerous countries
- Lowering of criminal responsibility age that have affected particularly Indigenous children and youth in certain countries

Issues affecting Indigenous women:

- Gender-based violence against Indigenous women
- Forced sterilisation of Indigenous women and their call for justice
- Trafficking and exploitation of Indigenous persons and particularly women

Diminishing political interest and commitment:

- On-going policies and legal acts, including by judicial bodies, seeking to water down or alter legal protection of Indigenous Peoples' rights in numerous countries
- Unimplemented courts cases won by Indigenous Peoples, including findings from regional human rights mechanisms such as the Inter-American human rights system and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
- Defunding of Indigenous Peoples programmes in several countries

II.3. Global context for human rights

Indigenous Peoples' rights do not exist in vacuum, and every mandate-holder must face the particularities of the time, in which his or her mandate unfolds.

My mandate comes at a time, when human rights are under pressure. The fundamental human rights principles of equality, non-discrimination, self-determination and friendly international relations are those that intend to weave us together as a global human family. As proclaimed in the Preamble of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights: "*...recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family constitutes the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.*".

Today, these principles are still standing, but we begin to see the contours of the chaos that would arise if these were to collapse. If these global values and principles were to collapse, humanity would be disunited and left as a mosaic of Peoples, Nations, States and individuals fighting each other and vulnerable to exploitation by more powerful actors.

I see an opportunity in this challenge; it is time to stand up for the fundamental human rights principles that we may have taken for granted; it is time to reaffirm the centrality of human rights in international relations; and it is time to establish strong alliances and partnerships, and to urge those with influence and resources to REINVEST in human rights at all levels.

I would like to conclude on an optimistic note: in these times, where the essence of human rights is debated, is it inspiring to witness the creativity and vital engagement of young Indigenous leaders at the community, country and international levels, including here in the UNPFII. Let us all commit to empowering the next generation by sharing knowledge, fostering their passion, and amplifying their voices.

I thank you for the attention.