



World Forum of Fisher Peoples' [WFFP]
FORO MUNDIAL DE PUEBLOS PESCADORES
FORUM MONDIAL DES POPULATIONAS DE PEC'HEURS
International Secretariat,
No.10, Malwatta Road, Negombo, Sri Lanka.

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Panama's Indigenous Fishing Leaders Head to Geneva to fight for their lives

Panama's Indigenous Fishing Leaders Head to Geneva to attend the UN Human Rights Council session and Demand End to Fishing Ban and Deadly State-Sponsored Violence

GENEVA, Switzerland — Indigenous fishing leaders from Panama's Ngäbe Buglé region are heading to Geneva from September 16-24, 2025 to attend the United Nations' 60th Session of the Human Rights Council (HRC60). They are traveling to bring international visibility to the human rights abuses and threats to their livelihood that they are facing right now due to the Panamanian government's recent attacks on Indigenous fisheries and the people of Panamá as a whole. They bring with them an urgent request for member and observer states of the Human Rights Council to pressure the Panamanian government to end the country's latest fishing ban that threatens their immediate survival and to stop the state-sponsored violence against their communities. The delegation to Geneva comes as part of a coordinated effort between the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC).

These types of fishing bans reflect the structural discrimination and marginalization that fisher peoples and Indigenous Peoples have experienced historically and overtime. The Ngäbe Buglé people, much like other Indigenous groups in the area and around the world, have practiced their ancestral ways of fishing for their family's subsistence since time immemorial. Using only a fishing rod, small trap, and/or diving or 'lung fishing' to catch fish and lobster, they have been feeding their communities for centuries.

To attend this UN gathering, the Indigenous delegation is traveling 15 hours from their communities to the Panama City airport to take on 20 hours of airport travel to reach Geneva. Something they would not have to do if they could live peacefully in their territory as they have always done. So how did Panamanian Indigenous Fisher's rights erode?



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In 2010, Indigenous leaders were invited to take part and to take leadership in a conference put on by the inter-governmental organization OSPESCA which means 'Organization of the Fishing and Aquaculture Sector of the Central American Isthmus.' It was at this conference that Panamanian Indigenous fishers first heard the term 'scientific closures'. Soon, the Panamanian government came to the Indigenous fishing communities with a deal. The government promised seven social programs that the communities could access to make up for the lack of sustenance that would have otherwise come from fishing. The social programs proposed included a promise of a stipend, food, and infrastructure, but these things never arrived. Many Indigenous people that were fooled by these programs voted for the president because they thought they were in partnership, only to be deceived. Since 2010, Panama's Ministry of Environment has instated a closure of fisheries that many Ngäbe Buglé communities rely on for food and income. Over the years Indigenous fishers have fought back against each fishing closure that ensued after the first, enduring government repression that even took fishers' lives. From their five ancestral islands, they were only left with one called Escudo de Veragua.

This February 21, 2025, leaders of the Ngäbe Buglé and Ño Kribo fishing communities received a letter from the ministry of the environment saying the agency is now considering suspending all outdoor activity in Escudo de Veragua too. This includes subsistence fishing.

The environment ministry claims this closure is critical to the reproduction and recovery of fish stocks. They say this is a "one-year-closure... subject to renewal," which in the fisher's experience has meant permanent closures. However, Indigenous fishing leaders assert that the fisheries management methods they have practiced for more than a century have long included seasonal closures.

"Before this, the natural closures had always allowed us to fish sustainably with the rhythm of the sea. We have always known to stop our activity to let the species replenish before resuming the fishing season. And now, in 2025, the government has issued a ban on fishing entirely by blocking us from fishing in Escudo de Veragua, even though this is our right to life and right to food that our communities have exercised for more than 100 years," said Alfonso Simon Raylan, Indigenous fishing leader of the Ngäbe Buglé region and Secretary General of SITRAMAR (Sindicato de Trabajadores del Mar), a member organization of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), which represents more than 10 million traditional, artisanal, and small-scale seafood harvesters globally. Mr. Raylan is one of the fishers traveling to Geneva.

Banning subsistence fishing and ancestral ways of fishing is a threat to Indigenous survival. It violates customary fishing rights, and has been enforced through state-sponsored violence. This goes against internationally acclaimed instruments like the Small Scale Fisheries Guidelines, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The communities in the Ngäbe Buglé region represent more than 250,000 Indigenous citizens across Panama's mountains, coasts, and islands. In 1997, through an agreement with the Panamanian government, the Comarca in the Ngäbe-Buglé region was established as a semi-autonomous Indigenous territory that grants the Ngäbe



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and Buglé peoples collective ownership of land and resources. For so many of these families, fishing has been their primary and often main source of livelihood dating back several generations.

Ancestrally, Indigenous fishers in this region fish in March, April, May, September, October, and part of November. They stop fishing in June, July, August, November, December, January, and February. This means that Indigenous fishers have always used 'natural closures' to avoid a bad season and to allow for the natural replenishment of their seafood species and marine environment. Essentially, Indigenous fishers have always fished for just about half the year. The government's closures close off entire islands with the promise of replenishing species when that was never an issue.

The recommendation of 'scientific closures' that organizations like OSPESCA have imposed on central american governments dismiss generations of traditional ecosystem management expertise and stewardship and strips entire communities from having access to food, income, education, and healthcare. Over the years, the Panamanian government has installed no-fishing zones in four of the five islands that the Indigenous fishing peoples of Panamá call home. However, the latest ban targets their last island, meaning this is a complete moratorium on all fishing access for the Indigenous People of Ngäbe Buglé and all the communities that depend on this resource.

"We're already feeling the shortage of food and resources. Without fishing, we will not survive this crisis," Mr. Raylan said. "The repression, especially against defenseless and unarmed Indigenous People, must end. We need international solidarity!"

Both the fishing ban and Panama's new Law 462, which passed in March of this year, have triggered widespread food and resource shortages along with violent crackdowns. Since the passage, the entire nation has risen up in mass protests. Law 462 limits access to social security and medical care and worsens economic insecurity. Unarmed Indigenous protesters and their allies have been met with armed violence by the military police. Community leaders, including three members of Mr. Raylan's own family, have already been killed.

In recent years, states, often in partnership with corporate sponsors and big NGOs, have justified bans on Indigenous land and water rights under the "30x30" global initiative, through which governments have pledged to designate 30 percent of Earth's land and oceans as protected areas by 2030.

"WFFP denounces 30x30 as a 'fortress conservation' approach that displaces our communities who have long caretaken, relied upon, and successfully governed our ancestral lands and waters — all while enabling the continued expansion of extractive activities, such as mining and agribusiness, elsewhere. These initiatives enable top-down reforms that target our traditional fishing ways of life, while completely disregarding the real drivers of environmental destruction," said Herman Kumara, secretary general of WFFP.

Various human rights groups, such as Amnesty International, Minority Rights Group International, and Rainforest Foundation UK, have decried the risk of human and Indigenous rights violations if 30x30

forges ahead. Additionally, the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs has criticized the plan for ignoring Indigenous land titles and seizing resources under the banner of “biodiversity conservation.”

This June, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Dr. Albert K. Barume, traveled to Panamá following an invitation by the IITC and the Kuna General Congress which is a member of the National Coordination of Indigenous People of Panamá (COONAPIP). IITC's Coordinator for the Program on Human Rights and Biodiversity, Juan León Alvarado, accompanied Dr. Barume while he visited the Indigenous Peoples of the region. Together they saw evidence of severe injuries caused by bullets, tear gas, and other lethal ammunition used by Panamanian authorities against its Indigenous Peoples. He heard the stories of houses and community infrastructure being burned down and people being detained for over thirty hours without access to bathrooms or food. The victims also reported that the police prohibited health care facilities from treating people who had attended protests, resulting in many being apprehended by police instead of receiving medical care. They heard stories of violence against elderly, youth, and Indigenous children. This wave of repression has been particularly characterized by horrific violence against women, including pregnant women, at the hands of authorities.

Dr. Barume's mandate upon concluding his visit was to review all the reports on the violation of Indigenous Peoples rights and help the state improve its compliance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. While in Panamá he met with authorities, local leaders, families, and members of the regions that are part of COONAPIP that have experienced government repression and persecution. He offered to meet with the Panamanian government but they did not make the time.

"I truly lament what has happened here, it's not fair, and it's a clear violation of international rights that should have never happened." said Dr. Barume, concluding his visit.



Special UN Rappateur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Dr. Albert K. Barume's visit to the Kuna of Akua Yala community, in the Kuna Region of Madungandi, on June 20th, 2025.



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The IITC's press release on Dr. Barume's visit states that many regional Indigenous leaders are hiding or have been displaced from their territories to avoid assassination or imprisonment leaving their communities without their leadership and leaving their families behind. The victims of the government's repression and all Indigenous authorities organized within the COONAPIP demand the Panamanian government respect its peoples rights, the constitution, and international instruments like the UN Declaration on the Right of Indigenous Peoples and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These are in place so that states exercise full free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples and to respect the institutions and authorities that govern the Indigenous regions of Panamá. Indigenous fishers are particularly vulnerable during this time. Without being able to fish, they are not able to live. Indigenous communities that have joined the protests have been targeted despite being unarmed, leaving them defenseless against the states' new fishing closures and repression.

This recent wave of state repression started May 15th, 2025 by the hands of the police in Emberá territory where people peacefully protested against a proposed mining project. The repression spread throughout other communities that expressed solidarity with the Emberá people. On May 18th law 462 was passed and the rest of the country took to the streets.

In June, [over 800 academics](#), activists, artists, workers, union leaders, and community members from 17 countries including Panama, China, Spain, Brasil, El Salvador, Honduras, Colombia and the United States, wrote an open letter to José Raúl Mulino, the current Panamanian President, to demand an end to the repression. Signatories of this letter included artists like Yomira John and Rómulo Castro, environmentalists like Raisa Banfield, and former Ecuadorian Minister of Energy, Alberto Acosta.

On February 12, 2025, Maximo Jimenez Palacios, the President of the Regional Congress of the protected region of Ñö Kribo contacted the Panamanian Minister of the Environment, Juan Carlos Navarro, inviting him into an open conversation related to the government's intentions with their region and asserting their international right to Indigenous sovereignty including their Indigenous rights to free and prior consent for any development projects or decision making that affects their region according to article 114, ordinance 3 of the Panamanian constitutional law passed on March 7th, 1997.

The Indigenous community leaders that received the notice about the closure of the fisheries in Escudo de Veragua on February 21, believe the closure of their fishing grounds is tied to Panama's attempts to meet the 30x30 targets, dismissing Indigenous peoples stewardship of these ecosystems since time immemorial and dismissing the Indigenous leaders' invitation to discuss this vs being imposed on. "False solutions like these conservation goals are being used to justify bans that criminalize Indigenous fishing while allowing corporate exploitation of the ocean," said Pablo Green, a leader with the Kuna Youth Movement. "This is why our fishing leaders are going to Geneva: to tell the world that conservation without Indigenous leadership is dispossession," he added.

This mission to Geneva during the UN Human Rights Council sessions is a critical step to shed light on the repression and human right violations Indigenous fisher peoples are experiencing while advocating for their rights. Their demands of the Panamanian government are to:



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- 1: Stop the repression on all Panamanian peoples and assure a guarantee that the repression will cease;
2. And to restore Indigenous fisher's access to fish in their ancestral island, Escudo de Veragua.

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About the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP): The WFFP is a global movement uniting small-scale and traditional fisher communities from more than 40 countries to defend their rights, food sovereignty, and access to healthy oceans.

About the International Indian Treaty Council: The International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) is an organization of Indigenous Peoples from North, Central, South America, the Caribbean, Arctic and the Pacific working for the Sovereignty and Self Determination of Indigenous Peoples and the recognition and protection of their Rights, Treaties, Traditional Cultures, Sacred Lands and Waters.