# General Assembly Third Committee
# Social, Humanitarian and Cultural

# Protecting Indigenous People in Voluntary Isolation

by Jared E. Walker
Old Dominion University Graduate Program in International Studies

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## Introduction

According activists, there are more than 5,000 different Indigenous Peoples around the world comprising 476 million people, around 6.2 per cent of the global population. They live in 90 countries, in every region, and speak more than 4,000 languages.[1] Most seek to preserve traditional values while benefitting from participation in their national societies. But a significant minority, roughly 200 groups, prefer voluntary isolation.[2]

For the Member States of the UN, issues surrounding indigenous peoples can be difficult, issues of those in voluntary isolation especially. Responding to their needs can be expensive and politically difficult, affecting the power and wealth of established groups and institutions. Basic issues of national sovereignty, integration and identity may be at stake. For delegates at ODUMUNC 50, the challenge is finding the most effective responses with the widest support.




***Figure 1.*** *The extent of the Amazon over South America and South American countries.*

Indigenous groups living in isolation are found in such locations as Southeast Asia and South America. In South America many are located across many parts of the Amazon valley extending to countries such as Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guiana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela to name a few. While in Southeast Asia indigenous groups are in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Other prominent locations are India and Papua New Guinea.

[1] 'Indigenous people's rights', Amnesty International, 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/indigenous-peoples/
[2] 'Protecting the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and Initial Contact', United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024, https://social.desa.un.org/issues/indigenous-peoples/protecting-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples-in-voluntary-isolation-and

While their locations may differ, many suffer from many of the same issues. Issues such as logging, mining, infrastructure development, agriculture expansion as well as other activities that push people and communities closer to their lands. This occurs because the countries in which they reside both the citizens there and the government either have unwanted contact with them or have contact with them. While states may have good intentions and try to protect these people often those communities can become endangered and even face violence, disease and exploitation. By working with the international community these states can craft policy that protect but also respects the autonomy and self-determination of these indigenous peoples.

## Background

Indigenous Peoples face eviction from the ancestral lands they have inhabited for generations, as well as restricted access to education, health care and housing. Indigenous human rights defenders are intimidated, attacked, and sometimes even killed, often with the support of the state.

Indigenous people are more likely to live in extreme poverty and suffer higher rates of landlessness, malnutrition and internal displacement than other groups. They often rank highest for prison inmates, illiteracy and unemployment, while their life expectancy is up to 20 years lower compared to non-Indigenous people.

Because they stayed in place while the world around them changed rapidly, ingenious groups and people are especially marginalized from larger societies and vulnerable. Examples can be found around in the world, in the countries with the largest territories, such as Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, India, Russia and the United States. Smaller states are not immune, either.

The Amazon Basin and the island and forests of Southeast Asia have numerous communities that have varying degrees of isolation. Geography has played a role in both providing refuge for these indigenous communities but also exposing them to competition over natural resources.

Keep in mind that people in isolation in the Amazon and those in Southeast Asia are comparable, they are not identical. The indigenous people of the Amazon reflect their history with European colonization especially the Spanish and Portuguese which led to not only those powers economic expansion but also the local's faced displacement, missionary campaigns, and epidemics after encounters with outsiders. These indigenous people have responded by moving deeper into the Amazon and rejecting future contact with outsiders.

In Southeast Asia islands and forests is where the indigenous people used to remain isolated. But now those barriers are no longer keeping them isolated, and they face issues like logging, mining, expanding farmland, infrastructure and states. Due to their remote locations many groups have maintained their autonomy, but their land has been increasingly incorporated into the national and international economic systems. Here geography has helped indigenous groups either maintain their autonomy or develop selective relationships with neighboring populations while still not integrating with the state in which they reside.

It is important to understand the terminology used when talking about voluntary isolation. Much of the terms have been crafted have been so by international institutions and governments that deal directly with groups in the Amazon[3]. This means those policies are directed towards voluntary isolation and initial contact. While in Southeast Asia groups there engage with their neighbors from time to time which includes trade. Regardless, these indigenous groups are still considered to be remote and isolated. That is why it is important that policymakers avoid treating all indigenous people as if they are the same.

[3] Peter Bille Larsen "The 'New Jungle Law': Development, Indigenous Rights and Ilo Conven..."

Regardless, people in both regions do face similar issues. Issues such as mining, logging, infrastructure construction, settlements, farm expansion are encroaching on the remote areas the indigenous people reside in. This can bring both benefits and crises to those in the surrounding area. The indigenous people increasingly risking losing their land that grants them the physical separation and helps maintain their culture as well. On the other hand, greater access can bring economic opportunity for the state and its populace.



***Figure 2.*** *Chief Tadodaho Sidney Hill of the Onondaga Nation gives a traditional welcome at the opening of the 23rd Session of Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. UN Photo/Manuel Elías.*

The case of the Amazonian and Southeast Asian indigenous peoples is not only about avoiding contact. Contact does and will occur. What is important is that the autonomy of these people is protected by preserving the territories and ecosystems that make their isolation possible. The goal of the international community is to balance state sovereignty and economic development with the rights of indigenous people. These rights included but are not limited to, territorial rights, cultural survival and ultimately their right to decide how they determine how much or how little they interact with the outside world.

## Issues to Consider

While there are many issues faced by indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation they face three primary challenges. Those challenges are **health**, **territorial** and **the no-contact conflict**.



***Figure 3.*** *Aerial photograph released by Brazil's FUNAI*

**First, the health tor Epidemiological threat** that the indigenous peoples face[4]. Due to many of these groups being isolated in remote locations they have not only been removed from people in the outside world they have not been exposed to diseases and built up an immunity to those diseases either. Contact with people from the outside world can in many ways mean death for these people.

Much like when the Spanish contacted natives of Central and South America during their colonization many of those people died from not having an immunity to the diseases that the

[4] Jamie E Ehrenpreis and Eli D Ehrenpreis. “A Historical Perspective of Healthcare Disparity and Infectious Disease in the Native American Population.”

Spanish were carrying. The indigenous people can die when exposed to such diseases such influenza, measles or even the common cold. That is why forced contact is often very much discouraged since doing so can trigger catastrophic epidemics and lead to whole populations being wiped out.

**The territorial threat** is caused by such issues as resource extractions and deforestation[5]. Due to the issues of the expansion of agriculture, legal and illegal mining, logging, oil exploration systemically slashing through the indigenous people's protective forest barriers. All above-mentioned activities remove the very forests that the indigenous groups to use to keep themselves separated from the outside world.

Whether the land is being used to build new farmland, develop mines, develop infrastructure or look for oil this removes those very forests. Doing so also impacts the indigenous groups in numerous ways. The source of food, plants and animals that they used to eat is impacted as well. Many of these are regional specialties and can only be found in certain locations. So, by deforesting an area not only do the indigenous people lose food and animals they have been dependent on for many generations but that can lead to the extinction of those as well. This also has an impact on the culture of the indigenous peoples as well.

These regional specialties are often used for various reasons that the tribes use for various reasons such as medicine, nutrition, spiritual and ceremonial, and everyday practical uses such as tools, shelters, hygiene and dyes. Once these plants and animals are gone the overall effect on the indigenous peoples is enormous and has many devastating effects on their community.

**The no-contact conflict** which is where the rights of the indigenous peoples to be left alone butts head with the right of both a state and its people to push for economic growth[6]. Indigenous groups have had many reasons, both recent and historical, for their fear of the outside world. Many times, outsiders have exposed them knowingly and unknowingly to disease. Not only that but indigenous peoples have come into conflict with locals who are doing such things expanding farms, cutting forests, developing mines or building infrastructure. The state and its people, especially those in developing countries, look at these ways to grow and develop, often being colonies that were used by the Europeans for their resources and not having the ability to utilize their own mineral and resource wealth.

Now that they look to increasingly seek to expand and develop these states often find themselves coming into conflict with the indigenous peoples. This has in many places led to actual fighting between the state's employees and the indigenous peoples. The fighting is increasingly not in the favor of the indigenous people who have found themselves on the losing end while the state uses its many resources on hand to have the upper hand.

## The Role of the United Nations

The UN has played an important role in establishing international standards concerning indigenous rights. The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Right of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) recognizes principles including Indigenous self-determination, cultural rights, relationships with traditional lands and resources and protections against forced assimilation[7].

The Office of the United Nation High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) can encourage governments to adopt policies consistent with international human-rights standards[8]. The OHCHR focuses on implementing the universal minimum standards established by UNDRIP. These standards being Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), self-determination and cultural integrity, protection of human defenders,

[5] Greenpeace Staff. "Forests Issues & Threats - Greenpeace."
[6] Natasha Chavez. "Development-Induced Displacement of Indigenous Communities in Ecuador - Researching Internal Displacement."
[7] Staff. "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples United Nations."

special protective measures for vulnerable groups, inclusion and legal alignment

There is also the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which operates as an independent expert under the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) Special Procedure[9]. The mandate holder's reporting and investigating process are structured around four primary pillars. Those pillars are thematic reports, country visits and reports, allegations and communications (the complaint process) and coordinated Human Rights Oversight.



***Figure 4.*** *A view of participants during the opening of the 23rd Session of Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. UN Photo/Manuel Elías.*

The UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues (UNFPII)[10] provides another avenue where Indigenous concerns can be discussed within the UN system. This is the highest level-level advisory body within the UN system dedicated exclusively to the rights and well-being of indigenous peoples. The UNPFII exercises its global mandate through four primary functions such as advising the UN system and governments, hosting the Annual Session, Raises Global Awareness and Coordinates Action and the commissioning of expert studies on the subject.

There are other parts of the UN system that can contribute as well. The WHO (World Health Organization) can provide expertise concerning disease prevention and emergency protocols concerning initial contact[11]. While environmental and developmental agencies can lend their support on programs about forest protection, sustainable development and other programs which can be used to help reduce economic pressure on indigenous peoples.

The UN can and does with other organizations as well. Take for example the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)[12]. This organization is part of the Organization of American States (OAS) and plays a critical role in enforcing and expanding indigenous rights across the Americas. The IACHR derives its authority from the American Convention on Human Rights

[8] Staff. "UN Human Rights Office."
[9] Staff. "Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
[10] Staff. "United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (Unpfii) | Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD)."
[11] Staff. "Global Health Impact & Funding Partnerships: Who Foundation."
[12] Staff. "Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)." Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

and the American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man. The four primary duties of the organization are the precautionary measures system (emergency protection), the case and petition system (binding legal precedents), monitoring and country reports and promotion of the American Declaration.

However, the UN must also respect state sovereignty. Most direct protection measures that must ultimately be implemented are either national or local governments. The UN's role can therefore focus on establishing a standard, providing technical assistance, encouraging international cooperation, gathering information, supporting indigenous organizations and helping governments develop effective protection policies.



***Figure 5.*** *Annalena Baerbock (right), President of the 80th session of the General Assembly, takes the oath of office on the original Charter of the United Nations. UN Photo/Manuel Elías.*

## Major Country and Blocs Positions

**Asia-Pacific Nations,** including Australia, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Philippines and Pacific Island countries: This is an area of the world that hosts isolated communities that are in dense island environments, e.g. the Sentinelese in India[13]. Generally, these nations enforce strict isolation policies through military or maritime cordons. These nations also tend to strongly reject external or international community oversight due to them viewing international interventions as infractions of national sovereignty.

**China**: The People's Republic of China doesn't recognize groups within its own borders through the same "indigenous peoples" framework used by UNDRIP. China tends to frame its domestic populations as ethnic minorities and stress sovereignty, development, territorial integrity and non-interference. Unlike Russia and the United States, China voted for UNDRIP in 2007. China is concerned with such issues as state-led protection, economic and social development with individual governments determining how protections operate within their territory and not having the international community force it upon them.

**European Union**: With this issue the 27-member bloc focuses heavily on human rights metrics,

[13] TOI World Desk. "Why the Sentinelese Reject All Outside Contact: The Science, History and Mystery of the World's Most Isolated Tribe."

corporate accountability and environmental conservation. For countries like Finland, Norway and Sweden with a significant ingenious population (the Sami), this is a domestic issue. For others it is more an aspect of their foreign policy.

The EU pushes for strict global supply chain regulations and to penalize companies that are sourcing commodities like timber or beef from deforested indigenous territories. EU member states tend to vote along the same lines regarding protecting isolated people's territories, preventing involuntary contact, combating illegal logging / mining and other forms of encroachment and aiding governments that contain populations in isolation.

**Russian Federation**: While Russian Federation supports protecting indigenous peoples it places stronger emphasis on national sovereignty and non-interference. With 160 to 190 indigenous ethnicities, some possible in isolation, Russia has a strong domestic interest at stake and tends to view UN initiatives as a threat to its nation integrity.

Russia was one of 11 nations that abstained in 2007 on voting on the issue of UNDRIP. Russia continues to work in the UN Indigenous forums but continues to push statements that emphasis that indigenous issues should not be politicized or used for geopolitical purposes. Russia is concerned with the vulnerability of voluntarily isolated people including their language, culture, traditional livelihoods, and territorial protection but will resist provisions about outside monitors, international intervention, sanctions, or international institutions overriding national authorities.

**United States**: Home to 574 American Indian tribes recognized by its Federal Government, the US is highly attentive to UN initiatives. Few are in voluntary isolation, but many insist on the right. The US was originally against UNDRIP but voted for the measure in 2010. The US traditionally has supported stronger international protections such as the protection of indigenous territory, self-determination, cultural survival, consultation and prevention of forced contact. The US wants those measures to be implemented primary by the national governments who exercise control on the ground and generally not the international community. The United States is concerned that the implementation is consistent with nationals' national laws but also with protecting isolated people's territories, preventing involuntary contact, combating illegal logging / mining and other forms of encroachment and aiding governments that contain populations in isolation.

## Some Proposals for Action

Below are some major proposals for action to be considered. The Member States of the UN General Assembly are free to choose any path of action—or non-action—that they prefer. As sovereign states, they are not bound by the precedence of past UN resolutions, or even by their own votes. But they are limited by the UN's preference for consensus decisions when possible, and a majority vote when necessary. Unlike resolutions of the Security Council, General Assembly resolutions are not enforceable. A Member State that votes against a GA resolution is likely to ignore it even if it passes.

**Balance protecting isolated people and respecting their autonomy.** Governments have a responsibility towards people living in their countries, but intervention intended to provide healthcare, education, security or other services could itself be considered unwanted contact. How can the UN monitor human rights violations or illegal corporate incursions within remote forests without physically entering and disrupting the isolated territory? What role does modern technology such as drones play if any?

**Establish guidelines for official (government) contact with isolated communities**. The principle of self-determination is central to this issue at hand. If an indigenous community has deliberately chosen to remain isolated should governments, consider the decision and exercise

of self-determination? Delegates should consider under what circumstances, if any, authorities should initiate contact. What public health protocols should be established by border authorities to manage accidental or emergency contact with isolated groups?

**Territorial protection is another major issue**. Preventing unwanted contact many require states to establish protected territories or 'neutral zones' and restrict logging, mining, settlements, tourism, missionary activities, and infrastructure development with these areas. Such policies can create conflict between the indigenous people's rights and natural economic priorities. How can the international community incentivize member states to prioritize "no-contact" zones over profitable resource extraction?

**Delegates should also consider cross-border communities**. Indigenous peoples don't necessarily recognize international borders. This is an issue in the Amazon basin and African Sahel, and parts of border between Canada and the United States. The problem is especially troublesome with nomadic or pastoral communities that follow grazing herds, which often bring them into conflict with other, permanently settled groups. where territories can extend across borders.

Protecting these communities may require governments to exchange information and coordinate environmental protection, law enforcement and emergency responses. In what ways can regional-cross border cooperation be enhanced to protect nomadic isolated tribes whose traditional lands span multiple countries?

**Delegates should distinguish between problems of voluntary isolation versus geographic remoteness.** Governments should avoid if every remote indigenous community wants complete isolation while simultaneously ensuring that communities seeking isolation are not subjected to forced contact. Make sure to look at every situation as separate from the others. Not all situations are the same so don't treat them the same. Leave flexibility so that each nation can use the methods that are best suited for them. But too much flexibility may undermine global consistency and permit sovereign states to ignore UN mandates.

**A possibility always on the agenda is to leave the issue entirely to the sovereign Member States**. While advocates for ingenious people seek focused policy solutions, some Member State governments resist the idea of special treatment. They prefer to treat all residents under a single system of laws and regulations without ethnic exceptions. Some have policies to suppress or even combat ethnicities associated with national separatism or terrorism. Others refuse to elevate the concerns of specific groups. For these states, UN mandates are a challenge or threat to national goals of greater importance to them. Their preferred solution is to remove the UN as much as possible.

## Conclusion

Protecting indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation presents the international community with an unusual challenge. Unlike many humanitarian situations, the objective is not necessarily to increase interaction between vulnerable populations and governments. In some circumstances, successful protection may require outsiders to maintain their distance, a non-interference directive.




***Figure 6.*** *Participants at an interactive dialogue on the theme 'Indigenous People' Rights to Education*

Experiences in the Amazon and Southeast Asia demonstrate that voluntary isolation cannot be separated from territorial protection. Logging, mining, agriculture expansion, infrastructure development, environmental degradation and settlements can eliminate the physical spaces that allow communities their independence. Disease and violence can make unwanted contact particularly dangerous.

The international community must therefore balance development, state sovereignty, strengthening international standards, supporting territorial protection, encouraging regional cooperation and providing governments with technical and financial assistance. Ultimately, effective policy should recognize that indigenous people themselves should determine the nature and extent of their relationship with the country they live in and the wider outside world. Protecting their rights to remain isolated is not simply about preserving remote communities but also about respecting their right to self-determination.

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