



International Indian Treaty Council  
Consejo Internacional de Tratados Indios

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**United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 13th session  
Consultation with North America and Africa regions, December 1, 2020  
Intervention by Andrea Carmen, Executive Director, International Indian Treaty  
Council: COVID-19 and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in North America**

Indigenous Peoples in North America are profoundly impacted by the continuing spread of COVID-19 in our territories and the resulting loss of life. The highest death rates are among our elders, with deep, long-lasting cultural and social impacts. In May the Navajo Nation had the highest number of cases per capita in the US. Currently the Ft. Berthold reservation in North Dakota reports the highest COVID mortality rate per capita IN THE WORLD!

Since the beginning of European contact, we have suffered violations of our inherent right to health. Decades of resource exploitation, destruction of food systems and environmental contamination have caused disproportionate rates of cancers, diabetes and asthma. Poverty, overcrowding, and lack of access to health care and potable water in remote communities add to these vulnerabilities.

The current pandemic has been used by governments to roll back environmental safeguards and fast-track development projects that Indigenous Peoples strongly oppose.

In March 2020, the state of South Dakota adopted laws expanding the definition of “critical infrastructure” to include oil, gas and utility equipment, and declaring “substantial interruption or impairment” of that equipment as a felony.

In April 2020, the Alberta Provincial government in Canada committed over 1 billion dollars for accelerated construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline to carry tar sands oil from Alberta to the US. Alberta’s Energy Minister declared that it was a good time to build the pipeline because coronavirus restrictions limited gatherings of protesters to 15 people.

Efforts by some Tribal Nations in the US have been met with repression. On May 8<sup>th</sup> the governor of South Dakota threatened the Oglala Lakota and Cheyenne River Sioux Nations with legal action if they did not remove the checkpoints placed to protect their citizens in accordance with their Treaty rights.

Faced with government neglect and food insecurity, Indigenous Peoples implemented their own solutions, organizing relief efforts to provide food, firewood, and other necessities to families and elders. They increased efforts to strengthen food sovereignty and



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independence using original seeds and methods, and revitalized the use of their traditional medicines, healing ceremonies and practices.

More examples are provided in IITC's full report on COVID and Indigenous Peoples in North America, submitted to the EMRIP for its current study.

Finally, we thank the EMRIP for its recent country engagement which resulted in Sweden's long-awaited commitment to repatriate our sacred Yaqui Maaso Kova. The pandemic has temporarily prevented us from bringing him home, but we are awaiting that blessed day.

Choque Utesia, thank you very much.

*Working for the Rights and Recognition of Indigenous Peoples*  
*Trabajando por el reconocimiento y los derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas*