United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

“The impact of COVID-19 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples under UNDRIP”

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Taigüey, Good Day Distinguished Experts,

The United Confederation of Taíno People and the Caribbean Amerindian Development Organisation wish to thank you for affording us the opportunity to present you with our perspectives and experiences during these challenging times of COVID-19.

The pandemic propitiated curfews and lockdowns for the people. Those who work under the pretense of Economic Development took it as an opportunity to continue the destruction and desecration of our Taíno sacred and burial sites while no one was watching, and the pertinent government agencies were closed. This was the case of Dorado 18 by the US Army Corps of Engineers in the main island of Borikén, also known as Puerto Rico.

Borikén continues to be impacted by Climate Change. It has not recovered from the 2017 Hurricanes Irma and María; on December 31st, 2019, the southwest has been living with earthquakes every day; several that have caused major destruction and left thousands homeless and schools destroyed or unsafe. The floods of hurricane season 2020 destroyed many more homes and property. Children from the southwest had been months without attending school, and now the pandemic, has yet again impacted their education.

 The level of stress,the sense of isolation these events have caused have a direct adverse impact on our people’s Mental Health and they have increased to disturbing proportions with the COVID-19 pandemic. We have a big elderly community and people with disabilities in remote areas; yet protective equipment was not reaching these communities. State NOR government agencies provided the much needed assistance. Our people suffer from most of the top non-contagious diseases, such as: Heart Disease, Stroke, Cancer, Diabetes and Chronic Lung Disease, among others. This has made our people more vulnerable to COVID-19 and we have lost many elders.

As we have in the past with the other disasters in the insular Caribbean, the United Confederation of Taino People initiated relief efforts to provide masks and other requested items as a way to assist our people; we took this on ourselves via community donations. We also linked seed donors with our Taino relatives in the Caribbean, as growing our own food has become a priority.

We have demonstrated yet again, the importance of our Traditional Medicines. Not only have we been using and sharing our own, but have been able to exchange Traditional Medicines from other Indigenous Relations to combat COVID-19..

Our Eagle Clan of Lokono-Arawaks developed the first commercially available internet-marketed organic hand sanitizer produced in Barbados by Guyanese Lokono-Arawak Peoples.

While the many webinars and meetings provided by UN Agencies and Bodies; The Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; the International Indian Treaty Council, Networks of Indigenous Peoples and those of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous People, etc., were of great benefit, we cannot forget the many Indigenous Peoples who live in remote areas and/or have no access to internet, cellular phones, and other modern technology.

We need States to consider and provide the emergency assistance needed to Indigenous Peoples with the same and equal sense of responsibility, as any other citizen/national and not as an afterthought, if at all. We make reference to Article 6 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:*”Every indigenous individual has the right to a nationality.”* and

Article 7 1. *“Indigenous individuals have the rights to life, physical and mental integrity, liberty and security of person.”*

To urge States, Businesses and Agencies to respect our rights as described in Article 11 1. *“Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.”*

Promote ways to enforce support from States to those Indigenous Organizations that are trying to assist Indigenous Peoples in times of disasters/pandemic/ emergencies without discrimination, and not based on the developed or developing country status nor the power of our colonizing states.

Hahom, your Excellencies.