

Third session of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent

I greet you all on behalf of my people; the Saamaka – one of the six tribal people in the country of Suriname. We are Afro-descents who have maintained autonomous communities since we fought and won our freedom from slavery more than 250 years ago. Although you may have never heard of the Saamaka, our ongoing fight for traditional land rights has set an international legal precedent that benefits all the Afrodecent groups gathered here today.

After centuries of connection to our ancestral homes in the rainforest, we maintain a strong spiritual relationship to our territory. We work to live in harmony with the spirits of the natural world around us. For the Saamaka, our forest is more than just a source of subsistence, it is the foundation of our beliefs, our social system and our cultural identity.

Though the territory of the Saamaka is rich in nature, we have insufficient opportunities to thrive. However for decades we have been in a persistent fight to survive and receive legal recognition.

Given the negligence of the Government, we decided to fight our case based on international human rights law, filing a complaint in the year 2000 with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Finally, in 2007, the Inter American Court ruled in our favor. This ruling forced the Surinamese government to recognize the rights of the Saamaka.

This judgement set a precedent in international law requiring governments throughout the region to seek free, prior informed consent from Indigenous and tribal people and share the benefits of economic development.

For almost 16 years, we have been pushing the government to implement the Inter American Court Ruling. Until today the government refuses to implement and comply to this judgement

It is now time to call on this forum to prepare a declaration for the recognition of people of African Descent in the line of the UNDRIP

Hugo Jabini, Afrodescendent lawyer and environmental defender.
Winner of the 2009 Goldman Award.