Ladies and gentlemen,

I am Joshua Shumak, a proud member of the Wassamasaw Tribe of Varnertown Indians and currently serve as the Native American Affairs Coordinator for South Carolina at the Commission for Minority Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today on an urgent issue facing Native American tribes—the need for reform in Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) rules.

When we seek federal recognition for a Native American tribe, such as my own Wassamasaw Tribe of Varnertown Indians, we are seeking acknowledgment of our unique history, culture, and identity. However, the current rules set by the BIA were primarily designed for tribes relocated from their original lands, often with treaties with the United States. Many East Coast tribes, like ours, have continuously inhabited their ancestral lands without such treaties. This disparity in recognition criteria poses a significant challenge for tribes like ours seeking federal acknowledgment. We must advocate for changes to these rules to better reflect the history and circumstances of tribes that have remained in their homelands for generations.

In South Carolina, our legislators often prioritize echoing the sentiments of Washington, D.C., rather than amplifying the voices of our Native communities within our state. This disconnect can hinder our ability to secure the support needed for our communities to thrive.

One poignant example is the Catawba Tribe, who have faced significant hurdles in regaining federal recognition. Their journey, including legal battles and advocacy efforts, highlights the resilience of Native communities in South Carolina. The recent lawsuit for federal recognition underscores the importance of a fair and inclusive recognition process that acknowledges the contributions and rights of all tribes.

Today, I call upon the United Nations and the global community to support us in advocating for reforms to BIA rules. These reforms are crucial to ensure a fair and equitable process for all tribes seeking federal acknowledgment, especially those, like ours, on the East Coast who have maintained their cultural identity and lands without formal treaties.

In conclusion, I urge for a commitment to reform BIA rules to better support East Coast tribes in their pursuit of federal acknowledgment. This commitment will foster unity, fairness, and respect for the rights of Native American communities across the United States.

Thank you.