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OAS

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GWCIA 30

CHAIR: Deepti Pilai

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Letter from the Chair

Dear delegates,

My name is Deepti Pillai, and I am so excited to serve as your chair for the OAS committee for this year's GW CIA. I am currently a sophomore at George Washington studying Political Science and International Business, minoring in Fine Arts. In addition to staffing, I travel to conferences across the nation with our Model UN Team. Other organizations I am a part of on campus include the Chi Omega sorority, KOA - a pre-professional public policy organization, the Fashion & Business Association, and the GW Indian Students' Association. Beyond this, I love to draw and read in my free time, watch horror movies, and play card games.

In this committee, we will be discussing very important topics relating to indigenous communities and their rights worldwide. In our current day and age, indigenous languages are under attack and face the brink of extinction in many regions. Similarly, the autonomy of indigenous groups is consistently disputed and exploited. This is why both Topic A and B are extremely topical and of concern to the Organization of American States. I expect every delegate to handle discussions around these topics with grace and respect. I understand this topic may connect to delegates on a personal level, and as such this committee will not tolerate any hateful speech or isolating language in resolutions and speeches related to indigenous populations.

I look forward to working with all of you as we navigate the important topics on the agenda. Your dedication and innovative thinking will undoubtedly contribute to beneficial discussions and the passing of impactful resolutions. As a Chair, I place utmost importance on diplomatic relations amongst delegates and treating one another with respect. Those who stand out in committee will be strong speakers and writers, but above all will prove their character as a collaborative, uplifting delegate. I look forward to seeing each and every one of you grow throughout the day and craft incredible solutions to address the pressing issues at hand. Should you have any questions or need guidance before or throughout the conference, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Best,
Deepti Pillai
Chair
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Committee Description

The Organization of American States (OAS) is a regional organization that brings together the countries of the Americas to promote solidarity, cooperation, and peace across the continent. Founded on April 30, 1948, with the signing of the Charter of the OAS at the Ninth International Conference of American States in Bogotá, Colombia, the OAS serves as a key forum for multilateral dialogue and action in the Western Hemisphere.

The OAS has its roots in the Pan-American Union, an earlier organization dating back to 1890. The transition to the OAS marked a commitment to a more structured and formalized approach to regional collaboration, especially in the context of the post-World War II environment and the emerging Cold War dynamics. The founding principles of the OAS are enshrined in its Charter, which emphasizes the promotion of democracy, human rights, security, and development.

Headquartered in Washington, D.C., the OAS consists of 35 independent states of the Americas, including 34 sovereign nations in North, Central, and South America, as well as the Caribbean. Notably, Cuba is a member state but has been excluded from active participation since 1962 due to political differences and regional tensions, although recent years have seen some efforts towards reintroducing Cuban participation.

The organizational structure of the OAS includes several key components: the General Assembly, the Permanent Council, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and various specialized conferences and committees. The General Assembly is the supreme decision-making body and meets annually to set priorities and policies. Each member state has an equal vote (with the exception of Cuba, which is not allowed

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to participate through voting), and decisions are typically made by majority rule, though some issues require a two-thirds majority.

The Permanent Council, composed of ambassadors from each member state, meets regularly to discuss and manage ongoing issues and operations. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) plays a critical role in monitoring and promoting human rights across the region, often investigating allegations of human rights abuses and making recommendations to member states.

In recent years, the OAS has placed greater emphasis on cultural diplomacy, recognizing that peace and cooperation also depend on mutual respect and cultural inclusion. In 2024, the committee's focus turns to a long-overdue and essential topic: the languages, cultures, and rights of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have lived throughout the Americas for thousands of years. Their traditions, knowledge systems, and spiritual beliefs have contributed greatly to medicine, agriculture, sustainability, and social values. However, they have also faced centuries of colonization, forced assimilation, and discrimination. Today, many Indigenous languages are disappearing, cultural heritage is under threat, and legal recognition of Indigenous rights is still incomplete. As delegates, your mission this year is to develop creative, respectful, and effective policies that protect Indigenous languages, support cultural rights, and promote unity throughout the Americas. Your proposals should not only address the challenges but also highlight success stories, inspiring initiatives, and opportunities for international collaboration. The future of the hemisphere depends on honoring its Indigenous roots—and this is your chance to help shape that future.

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Topic 1: Preserving Indigenous Languages in the Americas

Across the Americas, over 800 Indigenous languages are spoken—each carrying generations of tradition, oral history, environmental knowledge, and spiritual practice. However, according to UNESCO, roughly 40% of these languages are endangered. Many have only a few fluent speakers left, and the majority are no longer passed on to children. When a language disappears, a unique worldview, cultural memory, and body of ancestral knowledge is lost forever.

Examples from Across the Region

Guarani is a remarkable example of a thriving Indigenous language. It is still widely spoken in Paraguay, where it is not only an official language but also a core part of national identity. The country has integrated Guarani into its education system and public institutions, allowing the language to flourish. In Canada, over 70 Indigenous languages are spoken, including Cree, Inuktitut, and Ojibwe. However, many of these languages are threatened due to historical policies of forced assimilation, including residential schools, and the marginalization of Indigenous communities. Today, Canada is working with Indigenous nations to revitalize these languages through immersion programs, cultural centers, and media. In Mexico, the ancient language of Nahuatl, once spoken by the Aztecs, is still used by over 1.5 million people. Despite this, Nahuatl faces limited official support within public education systems, and many speakers report discrimination. Without stronger protections, this rich and historic language may continue to decline in use.

Why Indigenous Languages Matter?

Indigenous languages are carriers of culture. They preserve customs, oral stories, spiritual beliefs, and ceremonies that have been passed down for generations. Language is often the primary means through which traditional knowledge, such as agricultural practices, medicinal remedies, and ecological understanding, is taught and shared. They are also keys to biodiversity. Many Indigenous languages include specific words for plants, animals, and natural phenomena that are not named or recognized in dominant world languages. Protecting Indigenous languages can support environmental conservation and climate resilience.

For Indigenous youth, language is vital for identity. Being able to speak the language of one's grandparents creates a powerful sense of belonging, pride, and resilience. It allows communities to maintain continuity across generations, even in the face of colonization and modernization. Moreover, language rights are also legal rights. Under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Indigenous communities have the right to revitalize, use, develop, and transmit their languages to future generations. Respecting and promoting these rights is an obligation for all UN and OAS member states.

Challenges to Preservation

Despite these values, many barriers continue to threaten Indigenous languages. Assimilation policies, such as residential and boarding schools, have historically attempted to strip children of their linguistic heritage. In some countries, these effects continue to echo today through biased education systems. Discrimination against speakers is another problem. Indigenous people are sometimes mocked or discouraged from speaking their language in public or at school, leading many to abandon their native tongue in favor of dominant national languages.

There is also a significant lack of learning materials, including textbooks, dictionaries, apps, and audio recordings. Without tools and trained teachers, it becomes incredibly difficult to revitalize a language, even if the desire to do so is strong within the community. Urbanization and migration separate people from their traditional territories and elders, disrupting intergenerational language transmission. In cities, Indigenous children may grow up without regular exposure to their ancestral language. Lastly, many educational systems favor only the dominant language (Spanish, English, French, or Portuguese), marginalizing or ignoring Indigenous languages entirely. Without institutional support, Indigenous languages remain on the periphery of society and risk extinction.

Existing Efforts and Success Stories

In recent years, some countries have taken promising steps to protect and revitalize Indigenous languages. For example, Peru created a Vice Ministry of Intercultural Affairs, which works to promote bilingual education and culturally relevant curricula in rural and Indigenous communities. Bolivia's Constitution officially recognizes 36 Indigenous languages, reflecting the country's commitment to its multicultural identity. Public institutions now often operate in both Spanish and Indigenous languages such as Aymara and Quechua. In Guatemala, the government established the Academy of Mayan Languages, which helps to standardize, teach, and preserve the many diverse Mayan languages spoken across the country. This institution plays a vital role in creating curriculum, training teachers, and advocating for Indigenous linguistic rights.

At the global level, momentum is growing. The United Nations declared 2022–2032 the Decade of Indigenous Languages, calling for governments and

institutions around the world to invest in language preservation. The Endangered Languages Project is a digital platform where communities can upload recordings, share stories, and access educational tools.

The success of Maori language immersion schools (Kura Kaupapa) in New Zealand has also provided a powerful model. These schools are run by Indigenous communities and teach all subjects in the Maori language, producing fluent speakers and reinforcing cultural pride.

Key Issues

1. **Institutional Neglect and Discrimination:** Many Indigenous languages are not officially recognized by governments and receive little to no support in public institutions. Schools, courts, and media often operate solely in dominant colonial languages, marginalizing Indigenous speakers. This institutional neglect is compounded by social discrimination, where speaking an Indigenous language is sometimes viewed as a sign of being "less educated" or "less modern," discouraging its use among youth.
2. **Intergenerational Language Loss:** Colonial-era assimilation policies, such as residential schools, have disrupted the natural transmission of language from elders to younger generations. In many communities, only older adults are fluent, while children grow up speaking dominant languages. Without structured efforts to revitalize and teach these languages, they risk disappearing within one or two generations.
3. **Lack of Resources and Funding:** Efforts to preserve Indigenous languages often face a shortage of funding and resources. There is a need for trained teachers, learning materials, and community programs. Additionally, digital tools, such as apps or audio

archives, are expensive to produce and maintain. Without sustainable investment, even the most passionate local initiatives struggle to succeed.

4. Urbanization and Globalization: As Indigenous people move to urban areas for education or work, they are often separated from the environments where their native languages are spoken. At the same time, global media and economic systems promote dominant languages, making Indigenous languages less visible or valued. These pressures accelerate language loss, especially among youth.

Topics to Consider

- Should the OAS establish a regional fund dedicated to Indigenous language revitalization?
- How can member states create or revise national education policies to include Indigenous languages?
- What partnerships with Indigenous-led organizations and global NGOs can the OAS support?
- How can countries with limited resources use low-cost technology (e.g., mobile apps, radio) to support Indigenous education?
- Can the OAS help protect linguistic rights through legal frameworks, data collection, or international reporting mechanisms?
- How should the OAS promote cross-border collaboration for languages spoken by communities in more than one country?
- What role can youth, schools, and universities play in Indigenous language preservation?

- Should there be a regional awareness campaign or cultural celebration highlighting Indigenous languages?

Topic 2: Promoting Indigenous Cultural Heritage and Rights

The second focus of this committee addresses the cultural and legal rights of Indigenous communities across the Americas. Indigenous culture is more than music or traditional dress, it is a way of life that includes language, land, belief systems, governance structures, community responsibilities, and traditional knowledge. These elements are deeply interconnected and vital to the identity, dignity, and survival of Indigenous peoples. Yet, despite their long histories and ongoing contributions to national and regional life, Indigenous communities continue to face serious threats to their autonomy, cultural expression, and human rights. This topic invites delegates to explore how the OAS can play a stronger role in protecting and promoting Indigenous cultural heritage throughout the hemisphere.

What is Cultural Heritage?

Indigenous cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible elements that shape how communities live, remember, and envision their futures. Sacred sites such as the Black Hills, Machu Picchu, or parts of the Amazon rainforest hold spiritual and ancestral significance. These spaces are not just historical landmarks but are vital to Indigenous religious and cultural practice. Development projects that disrupt or destroy these spaces sever communities from their sacred roots.

Traditional knowledge encompasses farming methods, ecological stewardship, herbal medicine, weather forecasting, and spiritual cosmologies. This knowledge, passed down orally or through practice, is adapted to specific ecosystems and often plays a

crucial role in climate resilience and biodiversity conservation. Spiritual practices include ceremonial dances, oral storytelling, seasonal rituals, and rites of passage. These practices transmit values, community memory, and teachings across generations, fostering a sense of belonging and resilience. Handicrafts like weaving, pottery, beadwork, and carving are artistic expressions that often carry spiritual symbolism, family history, and cultural values. These crafts can also serve as a vital source of income, particularly for Indigenous women.

Regional Case Studies

In Brazil, Indigenous territories have become a focal point of environmental, political, and legal contention. Over 300 Indigenous groups inhabit these regions, many of which are under increasing pressure from illegal logging, cattle ranching, and mining interests. Despite federal recognition of certain Indigenous lands, enforcement remains weak, and rollbacks in environmental and land protections have fueled violent confrontations. Indigenous leaders like those from the Yanomami and Mundurucu peoples have become international advocates, calling for greater protections and international monitoring.

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 2008, examined the legacy of residential schools where Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in institutions designed to suppress their languages and cultures. The Commission's final report in 2015 issued 94 Calls to Action, urging systemic change in education, justice, health, and media. Since then, some reforms have been initiated—such as the inclusion of Indigenous curricula in public education and land acknowledgments at official events—but many communities continue to seek stronger implementation of these commitments.

In Mexico, while the government publicly celebrates Indigenous heritage through events like Día de los Pueblos Indígenas, economic disparities persist. More than 70% of Mexico's Indigenous population lives in poverty, with limited access to quality health care, education, and infrastructure. Additionally, Indigenous languages and cultural practices often lack institutional support. In recent years, civil society organizations and Indigenous groups have advocated for greater linguistic rights, constitutional recognition, and community-led media platforms.

Guatemala's Mayan weavers, who represent a centuries-old textile tradition, have become leaders in the fight for intellectual property protections. Their struggle emerged in response to multinational fashion brands using Mayan designs without credit or compensation. Weavers have pushed for national legislation that recognizes collective cultural ownership and filed petitions with the Constitutional Court. Their advocacy has sparked national debates around cultural sovereignty, economic justice, and the role of Indigenous women in shaping legal reform.

Issues

1. **Loss of Land and Sacred Spaces:** Indigenous communities continue to lose land to infrastructure projects, agriculture, mining, and logging. This not only disrupts livelihoods but also erodes spiritual connections and cultural practices rooted in the land. Legal recognition of Indigenous territories is uneven across the Americas, and enforcement is often weak.
2. **Cultural Appropriation and Exploitation:** Indigenous cultural elements are frequently used by corporations, fashion brands, and tourists without permission or compensation.

Designs, music, and ceremonies are often commercialized or misrepresented, stripping them of their original meaning and violating community consent.

3. **Underrepresentation and Political Exclusion:** Indigenous peoples are frequently excluded from decision-making spaces at local, national, and regional levels. Without representation in parliaments, courts, or policy councils, their cultural needs and perspectives are often ignored or actively suppressed.

4. **Threats to Indigenous Leaders and Institutions:** Indigenous cultural activists, environmental defenders, and spiritual leaders are increasingly targeted for their work. Many face threats, violence, or criminalization for defending land and cultural rights. The weakening of traditional leadership structures through state interference or neglect also undermines community cohesion.

Topics to Consider

- How can the OAS support Indigenous communities in gaining legal protection for sacred lands and cultural sites?
- What can be done to ensure that Indigenous cultural property is not exploited without consent or compensation?
- How can the OAS help protect Indigenous cultural leaders from violence and criminalization?
- Should the OAS create a permanent Indigenous Cultural Rights body or advisory council?
- What policies can promote Indigenous-led education, media, and storytelling?

- How can regional trade and tourism be shaped to respect and benefit Indigenous cultural producers?

Country List:

1. Argentina

Argentina is home to several Indigenous groups, including the Mapuche, Wichi, and Qom. In recent years, there have been growing movements to reclaim ancestral land and revitalize Indigenous languages. However, land rights disputes remain a significant challenge, particularly in Patagonia.

2. Barbados

Barbados does not have large Indigenous populations today, but it has taken steps to recognize the historical presence and cultural loss of Indigenous peoples in the Caribbean. Barbados can play a leadership role in regional initiatives on cultural preservation and reparative justice.

3. Belize

Belize is known for its rich cultural mix, including significant Maya communities. Legal battles over land rights have reached the highest courts, with some victories for Indigenous groups. The government continues to face pressure to implement these rulings effectively.

4. Bolivia

Bolivia is a global leader in Indigenous rights, with over 60% of the population identifying as Indigenous. Its constitution recognizes 36 Indigenous languages, and the

government supports cultural autonomy. However, tensions remain over extractive industries on Indigenous land.

5. Brazil

Brazil's Indigenous communities play a critical role in protecting the Amazon. However, they face significant threats from deforestation, illegal mining, and violence. Recent political shifts have led to renewed calls for stronger protections of Indigenous territories and cultural practices.

6. Canada

Canada has committed to reconciliation through its Truth and Reconciliation Commission. While some steps have been taken to recognize and preserve Indigenous cultures, many communities still lack access to essential services, and systemic challenges persist.

7. Chile

Chile's Mapuche people have long struggled for cultural and territorial rights. The recent constitutional reform process sparked national debate on Indigenous recognition, though its rejection in a referendum highlighted lingering divisions.

8. Colombia

Colombia's Indigenous peoples, including the Wayuu and Nasa, have preserved vibrant cultures despite internal conflict. The government has pledged to protect Indigenous languages and traditions, though violence and displacement remain major obstacles.

9. Costa Rica

Costa Rica has a relatively small but diverse Indigenous population. The government has recognized several Indigenous territories, but access to education, healthcare, and

cultural funding remains limited. There is growing interest in supporting Indigenous tourism and ecological knowledge.

10. Cuba

Cuba recognizes the Taíno heritage of its Indigenous roots, though few self-identifying Indigenous communities remain. Cuba can contribute to regional cultural preservation through academic and historical initiatives.

11. Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic's Indigenous roots, particularly Taíno culture, are often celebrated symbolically. However, Indigenous identity is not officially recognized in policy, and more efforts are needed to preserve what remains of this cultural legacy.

12. Ecuador

Ecuador's Kichwa and Shuar peoples have been leaders in land rights and anti-extraction movements. The constitution includes strong language on Indigenous autonomy, but enforcement is uneven, especially in the Amazon region.

13. El Salvador

El Salvador has made recent steps toward recognizing its Indigenous heritage, including national days of recognition and language preservation efforts. However, historical erasure and lack of data continue to hinder policy development.

14. Grenada

Grenada has a limited contemporary Indigenous presence but can support Caribbean-wide efforts to honor Indigenous history and promote cultural reparations through education and commemoration.

15. Guatemala

Guatemala has a majority Indigenous population, including large Maya communities. Discrimination remains pervasive, but cultural movements—including the push to protect Mayan weaving traditions—are gaining international support.

16. Guyana

Guyana's Indigenous peoples, especially the Amerindians, live in remote regions with distinct languages and traditions. The government has recognized some communal land rights, but enforcement and investment in cultural preservation remain uneven.

17. Haiti

While Haiti's Indigenous Taíno population was largely decimated during colonization, elements of Indigenous culture survive through language and religion. Haiti can engage in cultural revitalization initiatives and support regional memory projects.

18. Honduras

Honduras is home to Garifuna, Lenca, and other Indigenous communities. Land rights defenders, including the late Berta Cáceres, have faced threats and violence. Cultural preservation remains closely tied to environmental defense.

19. Jamaica

Jamaica has limited Indigenous presence today but can play a regional advocacy role in honoring Indigenous contributions to Caribbean history and supporting cultural preservation through education and cultural diplomacy.

20. Mexico

Mexico has one of the largest Indigenous populations in the Americas, with rich

traditions and over 60 recognized languages. While there are legal frameworks in place, disparities in education, health, and land access remain key challenges.

21. Nicaragua

Nicaragua's Atlantic coast is home to diverse Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. The government has recognized Indigenous territories, but autonomy is often undermined by external political and economic pressures.

22. Panama

Panama's Guna, Emberá, and Ngäbe peoples maintain strong cultural traditions. The Guna Yala territory is a notable example of self-governance, though challenges include environmental threats and limited state support.

23. Paraguay

Paraguay's Guaraní language is an official national language and widely spoken. However, many Indigenous groups face high levels of poverty and marginalization, especially in rural areas.

24. Peru

Peru's Indigenous peoples, including Quechua and Aymara, have deep cultural traditions. Government programs support intercultural education, but mining and deforestation continue to threaten Indigenous communities.

25. Saint Kitts and Nevis

While Saint Kitts and Nevis has no large Indigenous populations today, it can participate in regional projects to commemorate Indigenous history and support cultural awareness.

26. Saint Lucia

Saint Lucia can contribute to regional cultural memory initiatives and promote awareness of pre-colonial Indigenous heritage through museums, education, and historical research.

27. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines honors its Indigenous history through annual events and cultural programs. Greater regional coordination could help preserve shared Caribbean Indigenous heritage.

28. Suriname

Suriname has a significant Indigenous population with recognized land and cultural rights. However, illegal logging and extractive projects continue to pose risks to cultural and environmental sustainability.

29. Trinidad and Tobago

Trinidad and Tobago, while not home to large Indigenous populations today, recognizes Indigenous heritage and hosts events honoring First Peoples. Opportunities exist to expand support for cultural research and education.

30. United States

The U.S. has over 570 federally recognized tribes with a broad range of cultural practices. While there are legal protections for sacred sites and cultural expressions, enforcement varies, and many tribes continue to advocate for greater self-determination.

31. Uruguay

Uruguay has a small Indigenous population but has begun to recognize Charrúa heritage

through educational and cultural initiatives. Greater governmental support could help promote broader awareness.

32. Venezuela

Venezuela is home to multiple Indigenous groups, including the Wayuu and Pemon. The constitution recognizes cultural rights, but economic instability and political conflict have limited implementation of protective policies.

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