

Indigenous Ngäbe leaders and international allies denounce violations of the rights to health and land before the United Nations

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May 12, 2026 (Valle de Agua, Panama & Chicago, USA) -- In an advocacy mission to the United Nations in New York, the [Movement for the Defense of the Territories and Ecosystems of Bocas del Toro](#) (MODETEAB) and the Northwestern Pritzker School of Law [Center for International Human Rights](#) (CIHR) denounced land grabs and related health harms affecting Indigenous Ngäbe communities in Panama. The groups traveled together to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (“the Forum”), which ended May 1.

In a [joint statement](#) presented to the Forum, MODETEAB and CIHR drew attention to the profound and persistent health harms of Panama’s refusal to demarcate Indigenous lands in the resource-rich province of Bocas del Toro in northwestern Panama. They called on Forum members to urge Panama to meet its international human rights obligations, including to protect Indigenous communities’ right to health. This year’s [Forum](#) focused on “ensuring Indigenous Peoples’ health, including in the context of conflict.”

“Too often, Panama sides with economic interests that seek to swallow up Ngäbe land, whether for tourism, industrial agriculture, or large-scale energy projects,” Mr. Feliciano Santos Santos, Coordinator of MODETEAB, said. “When these economic activities encroach on our lands, they undermine our food sovereignty, our health, and our very ways of life.

“As the UN Forum works to advance Indigenous communities’ health and well-being,” he added, “we call upon its members to urge States like Panama to guarantee secure land tenure as a necessary precursor for our physical, mental, and cultural health.”

In Bocas del Toro, some 150,000 Ngäbe people live in a state of legal uncertainty, which has led to the forced eviction of dozens of Ngäbe communities from their homes, while those who remain face constant pressure to leave their ancestral lands. Although Law 10 of 1997 required the Panamanian government to demarcate Ngäbe lands in Bocas del Toro as “annexed areas” to the Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca—an Indigenous territory officially recognized by the government—the Panamanian government has never carried out this mandate.

This situation severely affects Ngäbe communities’ physical, mental, and communal health. Many community members report that they can no longer gather medicinal plants or engage in the agricultural practices that have sustained them for generations, because local authorities threaten to fine or evict them. Others describe how their children experience chronic anxiety, because they never know if they will find their homes demolished and their

families displaced when they return from school. [UN expert guidance](#) states that “displacement of indigenous peoples against their will from their traditional territories and environment, denying them their sources of nutrition and breaking their symbiotic relationship with their lands, has a deleterious effect on their health.”

Following her intervention at the UN Forum, Ms. Olinda Castrellón Sánchez, Deputy Coordinator of MODETEAB, said, “Ngäbe families face endless intimidation, threats, and violence to force us to leave the land where we have lived for generations. We live in constant fear of land grabs, and we never know what the next day will hold.

“To end these violations of our human rights, the Panamanian authorities must finally recognize and protect our land rights,” Castrellón Sánchez added. “Only then will our communities be able to resume healthy and tranquil lives.”

In addition to speaking with the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, MODETEAB and CIHR met with other UN officials, [urging them](#) to raise concerns with Panama’s government about patterns of land dispossession and the resulting health impacts for Ngäbe communities. These UN officials included members of the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, who recently [questioned](#) the Panamanian government about excessive use of force and other human rights violations it allegedly committed against the Ngäbe people in Bocas del Toro province last year.

Since fall 2025, Northwestern students enrolled in human rights experiential courses have worked with MODETEAB to analyze the international human rights standards that protect Indigenous peoples’ right to health and to document the myriad ways in which land displacement affects Ngäbe communities’ health and well-being in Panama.

“Through our partnership with MODETEAB, we have seen how Ngäbe families and communities facing displacement experience direct harms to their health and well-being,” said Professor Sarah Dorman, who directs the Access to Health project at the Center for International Human Rights. “In order to address these health harms, Panama must therefore take urgent steps in line with its international human rights obligations to end land grabs in Bocas del Toro and properly recognize and demarcate Ngäbe communities’ lands.”

The 25th Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues took place from April 20-May 1, 2026, at the UN Headquarters in New York. The UN Forum has [previously recognized](#) that Indigenous peoples experience harm to their lands, ecosystems, and food systems immediately as harm to their health.