

Human Rights Centre Clinic

International Human Rights of Uncontacted Tribes/Peoples

Partners: [Survival International](#)

About

Survival International is a human rights organisation formed in 1969 that campaigns for the rights of Indigenous and/or tribal peoples and uncontacted peoples. It advocates for the rights of Indigenous peoples worldwide and works with local Indigenous groups and organizations to advocate and campaign for their land rights and right to determine their own futures. It has been involved in several prominent campaigns with the [Yanomami](#) of Brazil, the [Kalahari Bushmen](#) of Botswana and the [Dongria Kondh](#) of India. These peoples have various faced attempts to confiscate their lands and resources. Survival's work has entailed taking legal action, media and letter-writing campaigns, and working with other NGOs and scholars to support the human rights of Indigenous peoples. Most recently, their campaigning has focused on the rights of [uncontacted tribes](#).

Project overview

The project will support Survival International to examine international human rights law (IHRL) and norms pertaining to the rights of uncontacted tribes, and draw up a document which brings these together. It will also look at past court cases where IHRL and norms have formed the basis of legal challenges. This could mean examining the relevance of instruments of Free, Prior and Informed Consent, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as well as regional legal instruments, such as those in the Inter-American system. What is at stake are a number of rights including those to Indigenous self-determination, land, cultures, and even the right to life. Students would also be tasked with looking at several specific cases where international companies are either involved or potentially involved in violating an uncontacted tribe's rights. This could include the French mining company Eramet exploiting the land of the uncontacted [Hongana Manyawa](#) in Indonesia, and a logging company operating on the land of the uncontacted [Mashco Piro](#) in Peru. Other specific cases could include looking into relevant international law regarding plans to build a megaport and industrial complex in India which could impact the [Shompen people](#), many of whom are uncontacted.

Background

On the 9th of August this year, the United Nations declared [Protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples in voluntary isolation and initial contact](#) its main theme for Indigenous Peoples Day. It estimated that there are up to 200 groups worldwide who live in voluntary isolation and affirmed their rights to live in this way. The areas where uncontacted peoples live are of interest today because they are places where the [UN definition of indigenous peoples](#) fits very well with high degrees of cultural continuity and continuous relationships to specific lands now asserted to be under the dominion of states.

Survival International has been the only international NGO to seriously campaign for the rights of uncontacted peoples globally. The identities of these peoples are in many ways unique in that they are defined externally almost entirely by the fact of their non-relationship with nation states and global institutions. However, these groups contain people whose languages, histories and cosmologies are valuable assets to human knowledge and the sustainability of our planet. Survival's campaign advocates for the recognition of these peoples' right to self-determination and right to their lands on which they rely for their livelihoods and survival, but it needs to do this through a thorough understanding of international human rights law and norms. Among the [threats to their ways of life](#) are cattle ranching, disease, missionaries, colonists, loggers, roads, and extractive industry.

Project output

Survival International personnel led by Fiona Watson will work with a project team from the Essex Human Rights Centre Clinic to produce a report (totalling approximately 10,000-12,000 words) detailing the norms and standards in international human rights law relevant to the protection of the human rights of uncontacted tribes. This will include sections on how these operate in specific cases, some of which are mentioned above, and provide a list of legal options for Survival International. In turn, Survival International will work closely with the supervisors and students, granting access to its expertise. The report will be valuable in helping Survival International develop its campaigns to protect the rights of uncontacted peoples. The team will also submit a 1,000-word blogpost in May 2025.

Timeline

Phase 1: November – December 2024:

- Online briefing and meeting with Survival International campaigners, researchers and officers.
- Preliminary research, understanding the project and developing the report outline.
- Identifying a list of relevant legal materials pertinent to the rights of uncontacted peoples with both Business and Human Rights and Land Rights angles.
- Identifying relevant international court cases and documents pertinent to the human rights of uncontacted peoples.
- Drawing up a list of relevant uncontacted peoples for case studies.

- Outline and bibliography to be submitted to the partner organisations for comments.

Phase 2: January – March 2025:

- Research and data gathering.
- Drafting summaries and analyses of international laws, norms, cases and protocol relevant to uncontacted peoples rights.
- Drafting summaries and analyses of the legal issues at stake in selected case studies such as those mentioned above in Peru, Indonesia and India.
- Submission of the first full draft to the partner.

Phase 3: April – June 2025:

- Revision and finalising the report.
- Blog for Survival International, on their site or another platform, about the main findings of the project.
- Presentation of project to the partner organisation.

Initial reading

1. Corry, Stephen, "Uncontacted Tribes Don't Need the "Protection" of Western Anthropologists" Truthout, 4 July 2015. <https://truthout.org/articles/uncontacted-tribes-don-t-need-the-protection-of-western-anthropologists/>
2. Gerstner, Libby. "The Right to Be Left Alone? Protecting" Uncontacted" Tribes of India and Brazil." *Tul. J. Int'l & Comp. L.* 28 (2019): 81.
3. Ribeiro, Fabio; Aparicio, Miguel; and Matos, Beatriz de Almeida (2022). "Isolation As A Statement of Refusal: Indigenous Policies Against The Violence of The Brazilian State in Difficulties in the Enforcement of Territorial Rights, Brazil," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 12, 143-147. <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1371&context=tipiti>
4. Stanfill, Carlie. "Lost Tribes Of Brazil: A Glimpse Into The Untouched Lives." *Globus Mundi*: 52. <https://crc.losrios.edu/crc/main/doc/services/department-pages/political-science/globus-mundi-2019.pdf#page=54>
5. Wallace, Scott. *The unconquered: In search of the Amazon's last uncontacted tribes*. Crown, 2012.

Focal point

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