

Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 13th session
The Arctic; Central and Eastern Europe, Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia
regional meeting – 2 December 2020

Statement by Ms. Aili Keskitalo, president of the Sámi Parliament in Norway

Giitu ságadoalli / Thank you Chair,

I am speaking in my capacity as the president of the Sámi Parliament in Norway.

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate at the 13th session of EMRIP in this extraordinary situation. I would like to recognize the severe challenges Indigenous Peoples all over the world faces due to the COVID-19 pandemic. States and the international community must strengthen their efforts to protect Indigenous Peoples, including our right to health care.

Article 36 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms that Indigenous peoples, in particular us divided by international borders, have the right to maintain and develop contacts, relations and cooperation, including activities for spiritual, cultural, political, economic and social purposes, with our own members as well as other peoples across borders.

The Sámi people is an Indigenous People with territories in four states. Due to the pandemic, border traffic has been restricted since March. Restrictions have had a significant impact on the Sámi society. It has affected our economic, social and cultural life. Family and social relations have been strongly disrupted, and this have especially affected our children and elders.

The restrictions have also affected the Sami livelihoods. Freedom of movement is a crucial factor for Sámi industries and their profitability. Access to cross-border services in Sami homelands has been a challenge. This may have given local impact on the availability of social and health care services in Sámi areas. Also, cross-border education in Sámi homelands have faced challenges.

The Governments of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and probably also Russia, failed to distribute information in Sámi languages at the outbreak of the COVID-19. The information in Sámi languages has been insufficient both in terms of scope and timing.

Insufficient information in Indigenous languages causes a serious risk to health, as a person can spread the virus against their will. It is truly a paradox after the International Year of Indigenous Languages, but also a confirmation of the need for an International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

Madame / Mr Chair,

In conclusion, the right to self-determination and the right to participate in decision-making in matters concerning the Sámi should not be impaired in extraordinary circumstances. States should, in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous Peoples, distribute information in Sámi languages and find measures to defeat COVID-19 which respect our right to interact over state borders.

Thank you for your attention / Ollu giitu.