



Suriname gives ‘hope and inspiration to the world to save our rainforests’: UN chief



UN News/Laura Quiñones | UN Secretary-General António Guterres (centre) meets with members of agricultural cooperatives led by indigenous women and men in Pierre Kondre- Redi Doti Village, in Suriname's tropical forest belt.

2 July 2022 | **Climate and Environment (/en/news/topic/climate-change)**

Suriname might be the smallest and least populated country in South America, but it is also one of the greenest. Considered a global leader in biodiversity conservation, with more than 90 per cent of its land surface covered by native forests, the nation's unrivaled natural resources more than make up for its size.

Suriname is considered a carbon negative country, as its rainforests absorb more emissions than the country emits. Thick green foliage seems to be just about everywhere, even near the outskirts of the capital, Paramaribo, which is itself dotted with bustling markets and cultural centres.

On Saturday, UN Secretary-General António Guterres (<https://www.un.org/sg/en>) saw first-hand the commitment of the Surinamese people to protect their natural treasures and ancestral knowledge.

“Rainforests are a precious gift to humanity. That is why from here in Suriname, I want to send a message to the world: **We must honour and preserve the gift of rainforests** because this is not a gift that will keep on giving”, Mr. Guterres told reporters at a joint press conference (<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-encounter/2022-07-02/secretary-generals-joint-press-conference-the-president-of-suriname>) with President Chan Santokhi at the end of his first day in the country.

The UN chief also delivered a stark warning: “If we keep seeing the [current] scale of destruction across the world’s rainforests, we are not just biting the hand that feeds us – we are tearing it to shreds”.

Mr. Guterres **stressed that rampant deforestation and worsening climate impacts are increasing forest fires and droughts.**

“This is outrageous and shameful. It is global suicide in slow motion,” he said, adding that such destruction should be a global wake-up call to save the lungs of our planet.



UN Photo/Evan Schneider | UN Secretary-General António Guterres (centre) meets with members of agricultural cooperatives led by indigenous women and men in Pierre Kondre- Redi Doti Village, in Suriname's tropical forest belt.

A call from the indigenous peoples of Surinam

Earlier in the day, the Secretary-General visited the indigenous village of Pierre Kondre – Redi Doti, some 67 kilometres south of the capital. The area is surrounded by 9,000 hectares of forest, and home to about 100 inhabitants.



After driving through the iron-rich countryside, characterized by its reddish-brown soil, Mr. Guterres was received by the Captain Lloyd Read of the Kaliña peoples, along with the women and men of the community. They were singing and dressed in their traditional predominantly red-coloured clothing.

“The challenge [we face] to protect Mother Earth and the Amazon rainforest is not appreciated and poses threats to our lives,” Mr. Lloyd lamented, adding that his people – through no fault of their own – are currently endangered due to exploitation of natural resources and the consequences of climate change, such as large and sustained rainfall and flooding.

He said that mercury contamination – mainly caused by illegal extractive activities – is also threatening indigenous lives and livelihoods in the region.

“In the South, life is ruined by Mercury. There is no fish, no meat and no clean water to drink. Even extremely high levels of this metal have been found in the hair of our natives,” he said.

The Secretary-General noted these concerns and asked Mr. Lloyd for more details, **promising to be the ‘spokesperson’ of the community** during his later meeting with Government officials.

“This is a visit of solidarity with the indigenous communities in Suriname and around the world. When we witness that we are still losing the battle of climate change, when you see biodiversity more and more threatened everywhere, when you see pollution around the world it is very important to recognize that indigenous communities are showing the wisdom, the resilience and the will to be in peace with nature”, he told those gathered in the village.



UNDP Suriname/Pelu Vidal | Much of Suriname's coastal area is low-lying and susceptible to natural disasters.

Pineapples for sustainable development

Redi Doti village, partially nestled within Surinam’s savanna belt, an area of white silicate sand that is mostly infertile, manages to cultivate pineapples, passion fruit and cassava, which represent the community’s main source of livelihood.

Today’s visit coincides with the International Day of Cooperatives (<https://www.un.org/en/observances/cooperatives-day>), and Mr. Guterres was able to see the work of two cooperatives that are supported by the UN and its agencies, including the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO (<http://www.fao.org/home/en/>)), as well as the European Union.

One such cooperative, led by local women, creates organic pineapple derived products, such as jam, juices, and fruit cups. The other cooperative deals with the cultivation process, which is trying to turn the pineapple harvest into an all-year production, instead of a seasonal.

According to the UN Development Programme (UNDP (<https://www.undp.org/>)), inclusion of indigenous and tribal communities in economic prosperity is critical. While they constitute only 4 per cent of the total population, their rights to land cover more than 80 per cent of the territory of Suriname, but they are not recognized officially by national legislation.

Before leaving the community, Captain Lloyd Read told the Secretary-General that he would ask Tamushi the all-mighty [the great spirit God], **to give him the strength and power to go further, in a world threatened by climate change and war.**

Singing a beautiful prayer in his native language Kaliña, he said goodbye and told him he hoped he would remember them.

“Indigenous peoples have not contributed to climate change, yet they are among the most affected. At the same time, they have solutions that the world can learn so much from. They are proud guardians of some of the planet’s indispensable biological diversity, and they need support to do so,” the UN chief underscored later at a press conference.



UN Photo/Evan Schneider | UN Secretary-General António Guterres plants a young mangrove tree in the Weg Naar Zee mangrove rehabilitation site in Suriname.

Planting hope with mangroves

From the forest, the Secretary-General made his way to the beach, where he could see the devastating impacts of climate change fueled coastal erosion, flooding and sea-level rise.

Weg Naar Zee, an easily accessible coastal area of about 10,000 acres situated north-west of Paramaribo and part of the 386 kms of the mainly muddy coastal zone of Suriname, has suffered from extreme erosion which has resulted in an absence of soft sling mud, a preferred foraging habitat for shorebirds.

Since 2016, the UN has supported the country's efforts, led by academics and students, to increase conservation, natural restoration and rehabilitation of mangroves. One such project, led by Anton de Kom University of Suriname, installs sediment trapping structures along the coast and plants to reverse the damage.

Walking along the muddy shore with Suriname's Minister of Spatial Planning, Silvano Tjong-Ahin, Mr. Guterres planted a young mangrove tree. This project is being led by Professor Sieuwnat Naipal, who is one of the driving forces behind mangrove conservation in the country.

"Nature-based solutions – such as preserving mangroves, rainforests and other essential ecosystems – are vital. **The world needs more such initiatives,**" he told the press.

Earlier, the Secretary-General said that mangroves held a special meaning for him, because the first book he read as a child was about those hardy, uniquely beneficial trees and shrubs.

Mangroves play an essential part in the fight against climate change, as they can capture and store huge quantities of carbon in their roots and even in the soils in which they grow.

They are also extremely important to our coastal environments and habitats and nursery havens for a diverse array of species. They are called the 'kidneys of the coasts' because of the role that they play in nutrient cycling within the coastal environment.



UNDP Suriname/Pelu Vidal | Forests cover 93 per cent of Suriname's land mass and are rich in biodiversity.

An exceptional example

“What I have seen here in Suriname gives me hope and inspiration. But what we are seeing around the globe is cause for deep shock and anger”, Mr. Guterres further said at his end of the day presser.

The UN chief stressed that unfortunately, Suriname stands out as an exception in a world that is moving in the wrong direction.

“Around the world, we are seeing the failure of climate leadership and the proliferation of disastrous climate disruption... To meet the goal of limiting temperature rise by 1.5 degrees, global emissions must decline by 45 per cent by 2030. **Yet current national climate pledges would result in an increase in emissions of 14 per cent by 2030,**” he warned.

Underlining that the big emissions emitters have a particular responsibility, Guterres highlighted that Caribbean nations are on the front lines of the climate crisis and have consistently shown steadfast leadership.

“As I saw today, we have the tools and the know-how. Our world needs the political will and solidarity to make the difference that is needed. Suriname and the Caribbean region are leading the path forward. We must follow that lead – for people, for posterity and for our planet”, he concluded.

The Secretary General will be in Suriname until Sunday, when he will attend the opening of the 43rd Regular Meeting of the Caribbean Community’s (CARICOM) Conference of Heads of Government.

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