

# 2025 Asia Preparatory Meeting on UN Mechanisms and Procedures Relating to Indigenous Peoples

25<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> February 2025

## Themes:

**“Implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples within United Nations Member States and the United Nations system, including identifying good practices and addressing challenges”**

**“Strengthening solidarity and Indigenous Peoples’ Position in Asia”**

## Keynote Address

*Gam A. Shimray, Secretary General, AIPP*

Good morning and welcome to all my distinguished friends, colleagues, and indigenous brethren.

For the past 25 years, Indigenous Peoples in Asia have held this annual preparatory meeting to engage with UN mechanisms and procedures in addressing our shared challenges. Yet, the human rights situation across Asia remains dire. The situation is particularly grim in Laos, Vietnam, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Myanmar, and India. Indigenous organisations in Laos have become non-operational, and Vietnam risks following suit. AIPP has been recording hundreds of cases of human rights violations against Indigenous Peoples every year. In confronting these challenges, we and our allies have given our utmost efforts. I salute the community heroes and leaders like you who face these monumental challenges with unmatched courage on the ground.

In the past, global analysts attributed these challenges to leaders retreating from democracy and the rule of law. Today, it is democracy itself that is retreating, threatening societal disintegration. In these dark times marked by violence and repression, it has become increasingly difficult for indigenous activists and organisations to remain inspired and motivated. I urge us all to reflect and seek renewed inspiration because seeking wisdom is essential in times like these.

Indigenous Peoples in Asia have long mobilised for self-governance. Our struggle is not isolated—it is deeply intertwined with broader political crises, democratic movements, and the persistence of authoritarian rule across the region. The movement for indigenous rights reflects a larger call for political reform, especially in states like Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, Laos, Cambodia, China, and Vietnam, where authoritarian control prevails. Even in countries like Thailand, where democracy is only nominal, or in India and the Philippines, where authoritarianism is on the rise, the indigenous struggle aligns with the wider fight for democracy and justice in Asia.

We are many peoples, with distinct languages, cultures, customary laws, and social and political institutions different from those of the dominant populations in our respective countries. Despite our

diversity, our common struggle has always been to attain the right to self-governance. Our early autonomous communities were the first self-governing polities before the formation of nation-states. These communities practiced forms of self-governance that were organically developed and negotiated within strong village or community foundations. The primary authority for governance resided within the community itself, and the ownership and control of customary lands, territories, and resources were under customary governance. Governance aimed to ensure the well-being of all beings—human and non-human—within our territories. This is why we assert that territorial sovereignty and self-governance are our inherent rights. They are not inventions but part of a universal law that must apply to everyone without discrimination.

However, colonisation disrupted our way of life. We were forcefully relocated, our lands and territories taken, and our mountains and seas exploited. Our children are forced into schools where our languages are not spoken, and our knowledge and values are excluded. Education has become a key battleground for cultural survival, with indigenous scholars and activists leading initiatives to decolonise curricula, integrate indigenous epistemologies, and empower future generations with knowledge of our heritage and governance traditions. Yet, we are compelled to live under governments that are not our own, limiting our influence and making our efforts nearly impossible.

Decolonisation, including that of the mind, is essential to create space for reclaiming our worldviews, value systems, and practices—the foundations of indigenous self-governance. We must rebuild, recover, and restore consensual social and political order, along with free institutions. Thus, our movement in Asia is fundamentally about both decolonisation and democratisation—challenging historical and present-day systems that suppress indigenous governance and autonomy. Indigenous governance is more than a cultural right—it is about expanding democratic space in authoritarian regimes.

As Asia faces increasing democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism, indigenous self-governance becomes more urgent. Too often, civil society organisations and mainstream societies view our struggle through the narrow lens of identity politics. Our struggle is not isolated; it is part of a broader movement for political reform, human rights, and resistance against centralised state control. These hard times present an opportunity to open new doors for our movement. The wider society must recognise that indigenous governance offers a viable and democratic alternative to the exclusionary and oppressive systems imposed by nation-states in Asia.

Let me highlight a few critical connections:

- **Myanmar:** The post-coup landscape remains unstable, with democracy appearing increasingly elusive. The junta's proposed elections are widely seen as illegitimate, aimed at consolidating military dominance. International responses have been mixed: Western nations impose sanctions, while China, Russia, and India support the military. ASEAN's diplomatic efforts remain ineffective. The prospects for democracy hinge on whether resistance forces can sustain momentum, unite, and gain broader international support.
- **Bangladesh:** The democratic transition faces challenges as the interim government, led by Muhammad Yunus, grapples with political instability, economic hardship, and regional tensions. The downfall of Sheikh Hasina's regime created opportunities for reform, but mounting pressures may derail the transition. Indigenous Peoples face attacks, and their voices are drowned out in the turmoil. Without broad consensus and effective governance, Bangladesh risks slipping back into authoritarianism.

- **Northeast India:** Peace negotiations with indigenous armed groups could contribute to the country's democratisation, but the government's approach—mixing political talks, military operations, and economic incentives—often fosters corruption. One of the most significant efforts, the Naga peace process, has been ongoing since 1997. Despite the signing of a Framework Agreement in 2015, a political solution remains elusive, and the process is nearly collapsing. Deep-seated ethnic rivalries and intermittent violence have further hindered peace efforts. The eruption of intense conflict between the Zo-Kuki and Meitei communities in May 2023 has further deepened the crisis, complicating ongoing peace efforts. True peace requires addressing unresolved political issues, governance failures, and inter-ethnic trust with a vision for genuine political reform and democratisation.
- **Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China:** One-party rule in these countries severely limits political activism, leaving little space for Indigenous advocacy or democratic progress. The suppression of indigenous voices reflects the broader suppression of civil society and dissent, underscoring the need for stronger transnational and international solidarity.

We must also reflect on the effectiveness of Indigenous Peoples' engagement with UN mechanisms. While scepticism and mistrust have grown, I urge us to imagine a world without the UN or where the UN collapses. I believe our days would be darker, with more violence, authoritarianism, and suppression. Despite its shortcomings, the UN remains an essential institution that helps mitigate the life-threatening situations we face. In the absence of an alternative, we must continue to hope and work towards reforming the UN to make it more purposeful, meaningful, and effective.

International advocacy has played a crucial role in supporting indigenous rights. Frameworks such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and ILO Convention 169 provide tools to push governments to recognise indigenous sovereignty. In Nepal, indigenous movements used ILO Convention 169 to secure constitutional recognition. In Malaysia, indigenous groups challenged land-grabbing policies through international advocacy. The Philippines' Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA), despite its flaws, provides a legal foundation for Indigenous Peoples to exercise control over their ancestral domains. These examples show how Indigenous movements can strategically engage with international institutions to strengthen our demands and advance reform processes.

I wish us all a constructive and meaningful preparatory meeting as we continue to build partnerships and solidarity as a united force in Asia.

Finally, I would like to thank those who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes and our guests who have graciously spared their time to support and express solidarity. Your presence means a great deal to AIPP and Indigenous Peoples in Asia.