

Country Report: Panama
September 2021

Panama's indigenous communities, which make up around 12% of its population, belong to seven main groups: Gunadule, Emberá, Wounaan, Ngäbe, Buglé, Naso Tjer Di, and Bri Bri. Panama has recognized 25 indigenous zones, known as comarcas, yet, only three can implement policy proposals without government oversight. Panama's lack of investment and financial support for these communities has caused many people to [move from their comarcas](#) to urban areas for greater educational and financial opportunities.

Indigenous people in Panama [suffer disproportionately](#) from poverty and its effects. 95 percent indigenous people [live in extreme poverty](#) and infant mortality in indigenous communities is 3x higher than the national average. 50% of indigenous children suffer from malnutrition. Comarcas suffer from a lack of proper healthcare facilities and a language barrier for non-spanish speakers

Indigenous communities, cultures, and land have been under attack numerous times throughout Panama's history. For example, the Spanish displaced the Guna from their original homelands in modern-day Colombia to the San Blas islands in Panama in the 15th century. After Panama gained independence in 1903 it took control of the San Blas islands. The government subsequently began efforts to Christianize and assimilate the Guna, including by banning their traditional clothing and jewelry. This led to the [1925 Guna Revolution \(San Blas Rebellion\)](#), in which the Guna people mounted armed resistance against assimilation efforts. The conflict ended when the United States intervened and brokered a peace agreement. Today, all of San Blas is recognized Guna territory; only indigenous Guna people can legally purchase or use land.

Violations of indigenous land rights continue under the current Panamanian government. The Naso people originally inhabited the lands of Bocas del Toro, but the Spanish drove them [further north](#) to the Costa Rican border. Recently, the Naso have had their land rights violated by the [construction of the Bonyic Hydro Dam](#) and continuing deforestation of their designated lands.

Panama also violated the land rights of the Ngäbe Buglé people with the construction of the Barro Blanco Dam in 2017 which would have [cut off the river](#) that some 5000 people relied on for agricultural needs, fishing, and potable water. Several homes were also flooded with no plan for resettlement of those displaced. The dam began operation in 2017.

Other communities face pressure to assimilate through continued development and modernization, most notably with the possible completion of the Inter-American Highway. The Emberá-Wounaan community is fairly isolated and politically autonomous; the completion of the highway could [threaten their cultural preservation](#) as well as their land rights.

Genocide Watch considers repeated violations of indigenous land rights and neglect of cultural heritage to be **Stage 3: Discrimination**. Genocide Watch also recognizes efforts to assimilate and eradicate indigenous culture by the Spanish Empire and Panamanian government as **Stage 10: Denial**.

Genocide Watch recommends:

- The Panamanian government should enforce agreements and court rulings that recognize indigenous rights to the line and autonomy within their comarcas.
- Indigenous communities have the final say on all development projects within their lands.

- Panama should halt illegal logging and deforestation within indigenous territories.
- The Panamanian government should partner with indigenous organizations such as COONAPIP to work with indigenous leadership on their complaints and grievances.
- Panama must formally apologize to indigenous communities for its assimilation efforts.