

“WE WILL CONTINUE TO MAKE PROGRESS IN STRENGTHENING THE COMMISSION AND OUR MISSION TO SECURE AND PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REGION”

• Interview with Tania Reneaum Panszi •

By Sur Journal

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) is the main autonomous body of the Organization of American States (OAS). According to the OAS Charter and the American Convention on Human Rights, its mandate is to promote respect for and the defense of human rights in the region. It thus plays a leading role in the promotion of democracy on the continent.

For the IACHR, however, fulfilling its mandate has been a challenging process, especially in recent years, as it has had to monitor state action regarding human rights violations in the midst of social unrest, political instability, and the evident fragility of democratic systems in the region.

In an interview with Sur Journal, Tania Reneaum Panszi, who took office as the Commission's Executive Secretary on June 1, 2021 for a 4-year term, talks about the challenges of the IACHR and her mandate in the context of the health and economic effects of the pandemic, the impacts of misinformation on historically discriminated populations, and, the global political crisis that is now affecting the region.

Among the priorities on her agenda, the Executive Secretary highlights the strengthening of the institutional autonomy of the IACHR, the implementation of strategic plans for the advancement of human rights, and the work to accelerate proceedings. Furthermore, she

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reaffirms the responsibility of states to uphold international human rights standards and the need for an evolving interpretation of these standards.

Tania Reneaum Panszi is a Mexican national and has a PhD in Law from Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Spain. She holds an International Master in Criminal Law and Comparative Social Problems degree from the University of Barcelona and a second Master in Legal Sciences degree from Pompeu Fabra University. According to an OAS press release announcing her election, "Tania is the second woman to be elected Executive Secretary in the 62-year history of the IACHR."

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Sur Journal • You have been the Executive Secretary at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) since June 2021. Tell us about the priorities on your agenda and your expectations for this term in office.

Tania Reneaum Panszi • Since I became Executive Secretary, my priority has been to work to finish implementing the 2017-2021² Strategic Plan and continue pursuing this roadmap with the new Strategic Plan for 2023-2027³ to respond to the human rights challenges facing the region.

Up until now, in the exercise of my duties, the main areas of priority have been the strengthening of the autonomy of the IACHR and the work to protect and defend human rights. To draft the Strategic Plan for 2023-2027, we carried out a highly participatory, open, and transparent process to come up with a diagnosis and a plan to deal with the new regional realities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic based on the evolving nature of human rights. Regarding institutional strengthening, since I assumed my position, we have worked to build a goal-based organizational culture and management approach that helps improve the performance of the technical teams of the Executive Secretariat of the Inter-American Commission.

The priorities for the implementation of the 2017-2021 Strategic Plan are democratic institutionality; the independence of the judiciary branch and the prosecutor's offices, and access to justice; the institutionalization of human rights; safety and violence; development and human rights; and gender equality and diversity. It is worth noting that one of the achievements of the last plan was the elimination of the procedural backlog in the initial review stage of the system of claims and cases. For the first time in decades, the Commission managed to ensure that all claims were examined upon receipt.

I am convinced that in the coming years, we will continue to make major progress in strengthening the Commission and our mission to secure and protect human rights in the region.

Sur • What are the main challenges that the IACHR is facing in a “post-pandemic” context?

T.R.P. • I wish I could believe we are in a post-pandemic context, but we often hear about new variants of the virus and their consequences. Even so, the IACHR continues to prioritize its mission to defend and protect human rights in a regional context where poverty, inequality, and social exclusion have been exacerbated and in a global context marked by severe economic recession, war, lack of resources, and discrimination, which continues affecting millions of people. Violence, the migration crisis, climate change, arms dealing, militarization – there really are many issues that the world and the region in particular face. This shows us that it is urgent for states to put people and their human rights at the center of their actions.

The IACHR’s new Strategic Plan for 2023-2027 incorporates the impacts of COVID-19 both in its diagnosis of the regional context and its roadmap for action for the next five years, while seeking to ensure that every person in the region has better living conditions. All this based on the vision that people are always the beacon that guides the IACHR.

Sur • One of the goals of the 32nd issue of *Sur Journal* is to understand the current geopolitical scenario and its impacts on the promotion and defense of human rights. In this regard, how do the new global power dynamics affect human rights in the Americas?

T.R.P. • In 2021 and until now, the IACHR has monitored, with some concern, certain trends connected to the weakening of democratic institutions at the regional level. As documented in the 2021 Annual Report,⁴ this hemisphere has seen a weakening of national human rights institutions, the closure of democratic spaces, and violence against rights defenders and journalists, including murder, harassment, intimidation, and criminalization.

One could add to that the impacts of the post-pandemic economy, inflation, rising unemployment, and a war that, though it seems far away, affects the countries in our region. It necessarily hinders the access of millions of people to their rights, which is why we must think of urgent solutions in terms of government measures and public policies.

Gender violence against women also continues to occur at alarming rates. According to available data, until 2021, 14 of the 25 countries with the highest rates of femicide worldwide are in Latin America and the Caribbean. Furthermore, 34% of women aged 15 to 19 have suffered physical or sexual violence at one point in their lives. At the global level, 31% of women have been the victims of violence, which is not the result of isolated acts, but rather structural conditions, social norms, and cultural patterns that legitimate and reproduce this violence.

Sur • How has the IACHR responded to movements and coalitions that use the grammar of human rights to attack rights, particularly those of minority groups in the region?

T.R.P. • States have a crucial role in guaranteeing human rights and complying with the international obligations they have adopted. These obligations include refraining from reproducing discrimination and stereotypes that lead to exclusion. In short, states should adopt an evolving interpretation of human rights and reinforce their interdependent nature.

State measures, laws, and public policies must be based on international human rights standards. This is where the IACHR has played an important role, as part of its mandate to protect and defend human rights, using its different mechanisms, such as thematic reports or cases submitted to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights that address issues related to rights that could be at risk due to a narrative of groups that may permeate government actions and are based on discrimination, hate speech, misinformation, and prejudice. These mechanisms lead to recommendations by the IACHR and rulings by the Inter-American Court that give states the opportunity to adopt measures that turn attacks against rights into concrete actions for reparation, whenever necessary, and guarantee respect and protection for all people from all forms of discrimination and/or violence.

Sur • How has the IACHR dealt with the issue of misinformation and its negative impacts on human rights?

T.R.P. • Misinformation has a direct impact on the exercise of freedom of expression under the right to information and also affects other rights, as we have recently seen during the pandemic regarding access to health and vaccines. Misinformation prevents people from making free and informed decisions, particularly in the digital age, in which misinformation is reproduced at an unprecedented speed and scope.

Furthermore, prejudice-based misinformation sustains historical discrimination and hate speech against, for instance, women, LGBTI people, indigenous peoples, people of African descent or immigrants, among others.

At the IACHR, we have systematically and extensively addressed the topic in press releases, good practices guides, public hearings held during sessions, and reports with concrete recommendations. In this regard, our practical guide⁵ on universal access to the Internet establishes a few guidelines, such as the need for states to fight misinformation with accurate, scientifically sound information and guarantee access to quality online education that allow users to develop digital skills and understand the contents disseminated online.

It is important to recall one of the standards on the right to access to information, which has been included in the report on the Internet: states are obligated to ensure that all people can search, receive, and issue opinions and information under equal conditions.

Sur • How does the IACHR, particularly the Executive Secretariat, act to fulfil its commitment to the diversity of voices and the promotion of greater participation of civil society in the Inter-American Human Rights System?

T.R.P. • The Executive Secretariat of the IACHR is committed to the plurality of voices and promoting greater civil society participation in the Inter-American System through constant dialogue and exchanges with civil society from the Americas and the Caribbean. The Commission managed to organize periodic meetings with civil society representatives during the sessions held throughout the year, where we received important information on the regional human rights situation. Public hearings held during the sessions are also crucial spaces for civil society participation, and in them, we have worked on a diversity of issues and wide dissemination to help increase participation.

The IACHR's recent experiences in field in crisis situations offer very concrete examples of our relationship with civil society. In June 2021, when we went to Colombia amidst the social protests,⁶ we spoke with civil society. Now that Peru is undergoing a crisis and social conflict, we went to those territories to listen to victims and human rights defenders.⁷ Their voices and experiences on the frontline are crucial for allowing the technical staff of the Executive Secretariat and members of the IACHR plenary understand complex realities.

The 2023-2027 Strategic Plan was recently drafted as the result of a transparent consultation process that consisted of an open online consultation, 10 panel discussions with governments and civil societies, 12 consultations on priority topics and populations, 5 internal workshops with members of the IACHR technical team and a consultation with OAS bodies. In total, 2,663 people, 40 states and 585 civil society organizations were part of this process. The commitment of the IACHR and its Executive Secretariat to the diversity of voices and greater participation comes to life through our practice of listening and establishing dialogue.



Tania Reneaum Panszi.
Source: Personal archive photo.

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NOTES

1 • "Tania Reneaum Panszi assume como Secretaria Executiva da CIDH", Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, June 3, 2021, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://www.oas.org/pt/cidh/jsForm/?File=/pt/cidh/prensa/notas/2021/142.asp>.

2 • "Plan Estratégico 2017-2021," Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, March 2017, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/mandato/PlanEstrategico2017/docs/PlanEstrategico-2017-2021.pdf>.

3 • "Plan Estratégico 2023-2027," Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.oas.org/es/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/mandato/planestrategico/2023/default.asp>.

4 • "Annual report 2021," Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, May 26, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/docs/annual/2021/Chapters/IA2021-Intro-en.pdf>.

5 • "Guide 3: How to promote universal internet

access during the COVID-19 pandemic", Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2021, accessed December 31, 2022, https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/sacroi_covid19/documentos/03_guias_practicas_internet_ing.pdf.

6 • "CIDH culmina visita de trabajo a Colombia y presenta sus observaciones y recomendaciones," Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, July 7, 2021, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.oas.org/es/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2021/167.asp#:~:text=Washington%2C%20D.C.%20%2D%20La%20Comisi3n%20Interamericana,para%20la%20superaci3n%20de%20la>.

7 • "La CIDH condena el incremento de violencia en el Perú y programa visitas técnicas y de trabajo," Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, December 16, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.oas.org/pt/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2022/280.asp>.



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