Statement by the Special Rapporteur on the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment

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UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environments welcomes decisions supporting ocean protection in Norway and Thailand, at the beginning of a critical year for the ocean and human rights

The ocean, Earth's largest biome, is deeply impacted by the triple planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Scientists warn that six of nine planetary boundaries have been crossed or are near to being crossed, including the one of ocean acidification, illustrating the urgent need for increased ocean protection.

This call for urgent and effective ocean protection measures is backed by science and supported by Indigenous Peoples, children, United Nations entities, civil society, and international courts. Last May, the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), in an Advisory Opinion regarding climate change, concluded that States have the obligation to protect the ocean and prevent environmental harms, including transboundary ones related to greenhouse gases from any source. The Opinion is of paramount importance for the protection of everyone's human right to a healthy environment, and other human rights that depend on a healthy ocean.

Therefore, recent decisions in Norway and Thailand mark positive steps towards ocean protection. "These decisions align with the urgent need to promote sustainable practices and prevent further severe and irreversible damage, including the increasing impacts of fossil fuels and plastic contamination," concluded Special Rapporteur Puentes.

On 1 December 2024, the **Norwegian government** agreed to stop the first licensing for exploration and exploitation of deep seabed mining in the Arctic, a fragile ecosystem. This decision, which should become permanent, aligns with the implementation of the precautionary principle to prevent irreversible and serious damage to the deep seabed and connected marine ecosystems. It demonstrates the importance of considering Indigenous knowledge, science, and applicable laws towards key decisions on extractive activities that can undermine the ocean's contributions to human well-being. Norway should also consider joining the other 32 States that are advocating internationally for a moratorium or a precautionary pause to deep-seabed mining.

On 1 January 2025, **Thailand** banned the import of plastic waste. This is a vital advance for this country where between 2018 and 2021, over 1.1 million tonnes of plastic scraps were imported. This ban gives the opportunity to advance reparation and clean up plastic from the ocean, inspiring States to implement adequate and sustainable treatment of wastes, and moreover, preventing the creation of plastic waste at source.

“Norway and Thailand decisions align with the global urgency to protect the ocean and are good examples of the actions that must be implemented for it and to fulfill the right to a healthy environment,” Puentes adds. “States must fully implement these actions, and share lessons learnt on environmental effectiveness and human rights impacts with other States, who should urgently consider advancing ocean protection.”

On 6 January 2024**,** the United States Federal Government withdrew 625 million hectares from future oil and gas drilling in the Atlantic, Pacific, Eastern Gulf, and Northern Bering Sea. The President used an executive power used in the past by other Presidents for this historic decision, responding to the call of hundreds of municipalities, civil society, and scientists. The new administration revoked this Executive Order recently. The improvement of coastal protection is a positive step to advancing a true, just, and human rights-based transition and finding alternatives to fossil fuels. Therefore reconsidering this decision and reestablish the coastal protection can be a very positive step towards prioritizing the protection of the present and future of its people and the environment.

“Recent important decisions regarding protecting the ocean from Norway and Thailand are worth highlighting at the start 2025, a year that will be a crucial for the ocean and human rights. These are examples of the vital opportunities for States, businesses, and the conservation and scientific communities to collaboratively advance effective ocean protection through a human rights-based approach with the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment at the center,” the Rapporteur concluded.

The United Nations Ocean Conference in Nice, France in June 2025, the UN climate change negotiations in Belem, Brazil in November 2025, the high-level review of Sustainable Development Goal 14 in July 2025 and the implementation of the outcomes of the UN Biodiversity COP16 in October 2024 all are key opportunities for States to achieve effective results for the protection of the ocean and the human rights of present and future generations.

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