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UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Persons affected by leprosy (Hansen's Disease) must not be left behind in climate action

GENEVA 17 November 2025

As the international community gathers for COP30, I wish to highlight how the accelerating impacts of climate change and environmental degradation are deepening the vulnerabilities of persons affected by leprosy (Hansen's disease), a population that continues to face entrenched discrimination, exclusion, and invisibility. Climate change makes visible the structural inequalities that have long shaped the lives of persons and communities affected by leprosy.

Many live in the margins of states and societies, former colonies, remote rural areas, informal settlements, riverine communities, and other territories that are among the first to experience environmental destruction. Floods, heatwaves, deforestation, droughts, and extreme weather events not only damage infrastructure but interrupt the fragile systems of care on which many depend: early detection services, continuity of multidrug therapy, disability-related care, rehabilitation, and livelihoods built from the land and environment. Studies show that armadillos, a known reservoir of *M. leprae*, are expanding their range, potentially due to climate shifts, which may affect zoonotic transmission patterns.

Climate change also disrupts the networks of solidarity and mutual care that have sustained many communities affected by leprosy for generations. Displacement breaks social bonds; environmental loss erodes cultural identity; and the destruction of local ecosystems threatens the survival strategies of communities whose resilience has always been grounded in collective effort.

Despite this, persons affected by leprosy remain almost entirely absent from national climate policies, disaster-risk reduction plans, and climate finance decisions. Their exclusion reflects a broader pattern of invisibility that denies their full humanity and prevents States from building climate responses rooted in justice, compassion, and care.

As COP30 takes place in the Amazon region, home to some of the highest burdens of leprosy and one of the most fragile ecosystems on the planet, I call on States, development partners, and climate financing institutions to adopt a human rights-based climate agenda that includes the demands of persons affected by leprosy. This requires:

- Recognize persons affected by leprosy as a priority group in climate adaptation and resilience policies.
- Ensure uninterrupted access to diagnosis, treatment, and disability-related care during climate emergencies.
- Invest in resilient, community-based health systems able to withstand environmental shocks.
- Protect livelihoods, land, housing, and cultural identity, especially where segregation and dispossession persist.
- Strengthen inclusive social protection systems that address vulnerability shaped by discrimination and poverty.
- Guarantee meaningful participation of persons affected by leprosy in all climate-related decisions.

Building sustainable and just societies require listening to those who have endured exclusion and ensuring that no one is rendered invisible in moments of crisis. Persons affected by leprosy have the right to live in dignity, safety, and full equality. Their experiences, insight, and collective strength must be recognized as essential to shaping climate-resilient futures.

ENDS

***The expert:** Beatriz Miranda Galarza, the Special Rapporteur on the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy (Hansen's disease) and their family members (www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-leprosy)*

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For inquiries and media requests, please contact: YounKyo AHN, Human Rights Officer, younkyo.ahn@un.org

For media inquiries related to other UN independent experts please contact Maya Derouaz (maya.derouaz@un.org) or Dharisha Indraguptha (dharisha.indraguptha@un.org)

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