



**Opening remarks by Anita Ramasastry**  
**Chairperson of the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights**

**1st UN Pacific Forum on Business and Human Rights**

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Mr. Attorney General, Excellencies, Distinguished Colleagues and friends,  
Greetings from the Pacific Northwest and Seattle. Being on the West coast, residents of my State look towards the Pacific and consider ourselves part of the Pacific Rim. Our future is very much intertwined with that of the Pacific region and we have many residents here who come from Pacific nations.

I am honoured to deliver opening remarks at the 1st UN Pacific Forum on Business and Human Rights. I address you in my capacity as Chair of the [UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights](#), a group of five independent experts from different regions.

First, I would like to congratulate my Working Group colleague from Asia, Surya Deva, for his efforts to launch this forum in collaboration with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR.

I am pleased that this important dialogue is taking place despite the current challenging circumstances with the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The Working Group's ambition is to support regional races to the top among governments and business. We want to drive responsible business conduct that respects people and the planet. We have already established platforms for multi-stakeholder dialogue and peer learning in Latin America, Southeast Asia and South Asia, and last week we were part of the first regional forum for Eastern Europe and Central Asia led by UNDP.

As highlighted in the material for this Forum, flowing from a dedicated regional dialogue session at the annual UN Forum in Geneva last year – Pacific countries face a number of challenges connected to impacts of business, such as: disproportionate impacts of climate change, unsustainable tourism, exploitation of migrant workers, gender-based discrimination, unsustainable natural resources exploitation, corruption, and barriers for rights-holders in accessing remedy when harms occur. Pacific countries face particular capacity challenges to address the governance gaps that are at the root of these problems.

This is where business and human rights and the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) play a critical role, as they highlight the respective duties and responsibilities of governments and business to safeguard people at risk of adverse impacts connected to business. In terms of government roles, they also highlight both “host” and “home” state duties.

The essence of the UN Guiding Principles is that it is critical for business to identify the harms it is causing, contributing to, or linked to, and to work to prevent and remedy them. This is the biggest challenge – we need to ensure business is not done at a cost to people’s lives and wellbeing.

The Working Group is itself just coming out of another major event, the [annual UN Forum on Business and Human Rights](#), which took place two weeks ago. Normally it is held at the UN in Geneva, but this year it was virtual.

This year’s annual Forum had the theme “Preventing business-related human rights abuses: The key to a sustainable future for people and planet.”

That was the Working Group’s key message at the global forum: The UN Guiding Principles are a key tool for prevention of negative human rights impacts and as a result are essential to a strategy for a resilient recovery.

Let me highlight key takeaways from the global Forum that relate to your discussions today

**First, the UN Guiding Principles are a guidepost in times of crisis.** We face many crises, now and ahead, including the COVID-19 crisis, the climate crisis, and the crisis of continued racism across the world. These challenges have shown the fragility of systems that do not put people’s fundamental welfare and dignity at the centre.

**Second, our future is increasingly one of mandatory measures.** We now have a strong evidence-base telling us that voluntary measures aren’t getting us where we need to be. Trade unions, civil society groups, and others have tirelessly advocated for binding measures at the national, regional, and

international levels. Companies and investors increasingly agree, calling for unified approaches that level the playing field. There is broad agreement that mandatory measures should be based on the UN Guiding Principles and rights-holders should have seats at the table as measures are developed. **And to States everywhere – we can't wait forever in terms of levelling the playing field.**

**Third, the future is about protecting people and the planet as our fates are intertwined.** Environmental and human rights efforts are often siloed. This has to change. Our integration of these issues is indispensable for a sustainable future.

**Fourth, we must return to a rights centered approach where rights holders and victims are the ones for whom we design policy,** and in doing so include their voices, and ensure they have access to remedy.

Colleagues and friends,

16 June 2021 will mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Guiding Principles. Their unanimous endorsement by the UN was a landmark moment for business respect for human rights but also for better business.

This is why, in July of this year, we launched the [“UNGPs10+ / NextDecadeBHR”](#) project. It will result in two main outputs.

First, a stocktaking report will be presented to the UN Human Rights Council in June 2021, assessing achievements and failures to date.

This will be the groundwork for the second part where we will develop a roadmap for the next decade. The Roadmap will be launched on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June. I am wondering whether a Roadmap for the Pacific region is something that might be considered by States, business and civil society as a part of an agenda for action here.

Very few states in the wider Asia-Pacific have national action plans on business and human rights. I hope that the discussion here will pave the way for further and quick action from states to make policy commitments on business and human rights. I also hope that business will see the importance of sustainable markets needing to have the Guiding Principles as part of the recipe. And civil society including human rights defenders, and national human rights institutions are critical partners to both governments and business in understanding impacts of economic activities on people.

There is a fire raging, the world is burning. We are in the midst of fighting multiple crises – from climate change, to economic meltdown, to the raging

inferno of a global pandemic, to the fiery scourge of racism – so if we cannot make progress with respect to addressing how business engages in terms of respect for human rights, as we attempt to rebuild, when can we? If we don't want to deploy tools of prevention in the future, we are dooming ourselves to a world of future devastation.

Thank you for the invitation. I hope that your discussions will be constructive, fruitful and pave the way for further action in the region.