

## **Global warming is human rights issue-Nobel nominee**

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By Deborah Zabarenko, Environment Correspondent

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Reuters) - It sounds like a sick joke about global warming, with a series of horrible punch lines:

How hot is it? So hot that Inuit people around the Arctic Circle are using air conditioners for the first time. And running out of the hard-packed snow they need to build igloos. And falling through melting ice when they hunt.

These circumstances are the current results of global climate change, according to Nobel Peace Prize nominee Sheila Watt-Cloutier, an Inuit born inside the Canadian Arctic, who maintains this constitutes a violation of human rights for indigenous people in low-lying areas throughout the world.

Watt-Cloutier and Martin Wagner, an attorney with the environmental law firm Earthjustice, argued this case on Thursday before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States in Washington.

"We weren't going to go to court," Watt-Cloutier said in a telephone interview after her testimony to the commission. "It wasn't about lawsuits and suing for damage or compensation.

"It was more about really trying to get the world to pay attention and see this as a human rights issue."

Their best hope is that the commission will write a report on this issue, though even getting a hearing in Washington is a victory of sorts. The commission earlier rejected a petition to hear about alleged rights violations based solely on U.S. emissions of greenhouse gases.

The human rights commission has scant powers and can do little more than publicize its findings and propose a resolution to the 35-member organization.

In her address to the panel, Watt-Cloutier acknowledged the challenge of connecting climate change and human rights, but noted a practical purpose for protecting the people she called "the sentinels of climate change."

### **ENVIRONMENTAL EARLY-WARNING SYSTEM**

"By protecting the rights of those living sustainably in the Amazon Basin or the rights of the Inuit hunter on the snow and ice, this commission will also be preserving the world's environmental early-warning system."

Watt-Cloutier reckons there are millions of such environmental sentinels at risk, ranging from the Inuit to residents of low-lying islands that are subject to sea level rise caused by melting ice sheets.

They chose the Organization of American States as a forum because two of the countries where Inuit communities live -- the United States and Canada -- are members. Inuit also live in Russia and Greenland.

For Inuit communities, ice and snow are intrinsic to physical and cultural survival, Watt-Cloutier said after the hearing. Even the building of igloos is under threat.

"You can just imagine the brilliance and the genius and the ingenuity of building a home out of snow, warm enough to have your baby sleep in," she said. "And now all of that is starting to leave because snow conditions are so changed."

Many Inuit live in more conventional buildings, which are constructed mainly to keep the cold out. Unfortunately, with longer and warmer summers with 24-hour-a-day sunlight, this has turned many into ovens, Watt-Cloutier said. For the first time, air conditioners are in use in the Arctic.

Seasoned Inuit hunters used to be able to tell where the ice was safe, but because warmer seas have started to melt sea ice from its underside, even the most experienced hunters find it hard to gauge, and some fall through, she said.

"The glaciers are melting so quickly that where our hunters used to be able to cross safely, now it's so unsafe that it's become torrent rivers ... and we've had a drowning as a result of that as well," she said.

Watt-Cloutier quoted a hunter in Barrow, Alaska, to sum up the impact climate change has had on Inuit life: "There's lots of anxieties and angers that are being felt by some of the hunters that no longer can go and hunt. We see the change, but we can't stop it, we can't explain why it's changing. ... Our way of life is changing up here, our ocean is changing."

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