

Inuit say US breaching human rights with global warming

Friday February 09, 2007 By Andrew Buncombe

WASHINGTON - Delegation of Inuit is to travel to Washington DC to provide first-hand testimony of how global warming is destroying their way of life and to accuse the Bush administration of undermining their human rights.

The delegation, representing Inuit peoples from the US, Canada, Russia and Greenland, will argue that the US's energy policies and its position as the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases is having a devastating effect on their communities.

Melting sea ice, rising seas and the impact on the animals they rely on for food threatens their existence.

The Inuit's efforts to force the US to act are part of an unprecedented attempt to link climate change to international human rights laws.

They will argue before the InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights (ICHR) that the US's behaviour puts it in breach of its obligations.

"The impacts of climate change, caused by acts and omissions by the US, violate the Inuit's fundamental human rights protected by the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man and other international instruments," the Inuit argued in a letter to the ICHR.

"Because Inuit culture is inseparable from the condition of their physical surroundings, the widespread environmental upheaval resulting from climate change violates the Inuit's right to practice and enjoy the benefits of their culture."

Indigenous peoples from the Arctic have long argued that global warming was having a dramatic effect on their environment.

In 2002, villagers in the remote Alaskan island community of Shishmaref voted to relocate to the mainland because rising sea levels threatened to overwhelm their community.

Data has been gathered to support their claims and scientists have recorded how polar regions are the most vulnerable to climate change.

The most recent international Arctic Climate Impact Assessment suggested global warming would see temperatures in the Arctic rise by 4-7C over the next 100 years - about twice the previous average estimated increase.

The delegation to Washington will be led by Sheila Watt-Cloutier, who chairs the Inuit Circumpolar Conference and who was last week nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Speaking yesterday from Iqaluit in Nunavut, Canada, she said: "For us in the Arctic our entire culture depends on the cold. The problem of climate change is what this is all about.

"At the same time we will be bringing in lawyers to talk about the link between climate change and human rights."

The invitation for the Inuit to give testimony before the ICHR next month comes just days after the most recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change provided a dire assessment about the threat of climate change.

In the Arctic, scientists have estimated that summer sea ice could completely disappear by 2040.

Martin Wagner, of the California-based Earthjustice, said: "There can be no question that global warming is a serious threat to human rights in the Arctic and around the world.

"The ICHR plays an important role in interpreting and defending human rights, and we are encouraged that it has decided to consider the question of global warming."

The ICHR, an arm of the Organisation of American States, can issue findings, recommendations and rulings.

It can also refer cases to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica, though the US has always made clear it does not consider itself bound by the court's rulings.

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