

# Hearing to probe climate change and Inuit rights

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By Jonathan Spicer

TORONTO (Reuters) - The Inuit of Arctic Canada and Alaska are bearing the brunt of global warming and their way of life is in peril, an international human rights body will be told next month.

Inuit activists hope a hearing on Arctic climate change by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights will lead to reduced emissions and will help to protect the culture of the northern native people.

"In the Arctic, things are happening first and fastest and it's a way of life that's being jeopardized here," said Canadian Inuit activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier, who submitted a petition for a hearing on how climate change infringes on Inuit human rights to the commission in 2005 on behalf of Inuit in Canada and Alaska.

The commission, which is an arm of the Organization of American States, rejected Cloutier's request to rule on the rights violations caused specifically by U.S. emissions, deciding instead to hold a general hearing on March 1 to investigate the broad relationship between climate change and human rights.

Officials at the Washington-based commission said it will be the body's first such hearing.

Climate change "very much connects to rights because no where else in the world do you see ice and snow representing life and mobility like it does for us," Watt-Cloutier, a Nobel Peace Prize nominee for her work on the issue, said from the northern Canadian territory of Nunavut.

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

About 10 percent of petitions to the commission receive a hearing, said Ariel Dulitzky, the assistant executive secretary. He would not comment on why Watt-Cloutier's first petition was rejected by the seven-member board.

## RAPID CHANGES

Watt-Cloutier said her group's legal team will submit findings from studies including the 2004 Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, which concluded the Arctic is extremely vulnerable to global warming and is now experiencing some of the most rapid changes on Earth.

Average annual Arctic temperatures are increasing more than twice as fast as temperatures in the rest of the world, the study found, causing a decrease in snow and ice and a transfigured landscape.

"For Inuit, warming is likely to disrupt or even destroy their hunting and food-sharing culture as reduced sea ice causes the animals on which they depend to decline, become less accessible, or possibly go extinct," the study said.

Watt-Cloutier said the United States was singled out on the rejected petition because it has refused to sign on to the Kyoto Protocol on climate change.

Carbon emissions from U.S. industry represent about 25 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Democratic Party leaders are advancing legislation that would slow U.S. emissions, with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi pushing legislation by July 4 that would halve emissions by 2050.

Canada is currently 33 percent above greenhouse gas emissions targets it is obliged to meet by 2012 under Kyoto.

"This erodes and violates the human rights of an entire people who really are not benefiting from any of the industrial world that we have become," Watt-Cloutier said.

"In fact we become the net recipients of many contaminants that end up in the Arctic sink and in our bodies."

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