

# Amnesty backs First Nations

BY JUDITH LAVOIE, TIMES COLONIST APRIL 1, 2010

Amnesty International has thrown its support behind a Vancouver Island First Nations treaty group in a land-rights battle that has gone international.

More than a year ago, the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group took its complaint that the provincial and federal governments have violated First Nations rights to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, an arm of the Organization of American States based in Washington D.C.

Now, the commission's decision to hear the complaint should be a wake-up call to Canadian policy-makers, says a statement from Amnesty International.

"Indigenous peoples' rights to the land are absolutely vital to the fulfilment of a wide range of human rights," said Amnesty International Secretary General Alex Neve.

"It is unacceptable that Canada has created such steep barriers to achieving fair and effective redress for the historic and ongoing violation of these rights."

The treaty group represents more than 6,600 people from the Chemainus First Nation, Cowichan Tribes, Halalt First Nation, Lake Cowichan First Nation, Lyackson First Nation and Penelakut Tribe. The complaint centres on the claim that traditional Hul'qumi'num territory, making up the entire southeast corner of Vancouver Island, was illegally seized in 1884 for the E&N land grant.

The federal government argued that the complaint should not be heard until it had gone through domestic courts, but the commission ruled that the treaty process is not an effective mechanism for protection of rights and that Canadian courts have consistently turned questions of indigenous title back to government. It's expected a public hearing on the merits of the case will be held in October.

Robert Morales, chief negotiator for the treaty group, said the Amnesty support validates the work the group has been doing. About 85 per cent of the treaty group's traditional territory was taken without consultation, consent or restitution and, despite 16 years of treaty talks, the government has never agreed to put private land on the table for discussion, he said.

A forum on aboriginal rights, with Morales and Craig Benjamin, a staff campaigner with Amnesty International, will be held April 12, from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. at St. John the Divine Church Hall, 1611 Quadra Street.

[jlavoie@tc.canwest.com](mailto:jlavoie@tc.canwest.com)

© Copyright (c) The Victoria Times Colonist