

Treaty members meet over rights

International human rights body offered to oversee discussions

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Representatives of Vancouver Island's Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group are encouraged after a preliminary hearing Monday in Washington D.C., regarding their human rights complaint against Canada.

Spokesman Robert Morales said the Canadian delegation was asked by commissioners from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights whether they'd be prepared to participate in "friendly settlement" discussions with the treaty group to come to a mutually agreeable settlement.

He said the added fact that the international human rights body offered to oversee the discussions could mean the commissioners see merit in the treaty group's case and may agree to a full hearing on the group's complaint that much of land on southeast Vancouver Island was illegally taken from them without compensation.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs declined comment on Monday.

"The Canadian representatives didn't take the commissioners up on their offer to oversee any friendly settlement discussions on Monday, but the pressure will certainly be on for them to deal with our complaint if the commission decides to take it to a full hearing," Morales said from Washington after the hearing.

The treaty group (representing the Chemainus First Nation, Cowichan Tribes, Halalt First Nation, Lake Cowichan First Nation, Lyackson First Nation, and Penelakut Tribe) filed their complaint against Canada with the commission in October.

The treaty group says that up to 810,000 hectares of private land on Vancouver Island was illegally confiscated in 1884 as part of a land grant given to the Dunsmuir Company.

At issue is whether treaty group members, who claim the land as part of their traditional territories, should be compensated for the land, which is not on the treaty negotiation table.

Monday's hearing was intended for members of the Canadian delegation to present their side of the argument and Morales said he heard nothing that the government has not said before.

The government claims the issue should not be heard outside of Canada because the treaty group still has options to deal with their concerns in Canadian courts and through the ongoing treaty processes.

Morales said the treaty group now has 30 days to submit its final written

response to Canada's case that will be handed into the commission.

He said the treaty group expects a decision from the commission "sometime after that" on whether the case warrants a full hearing.

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