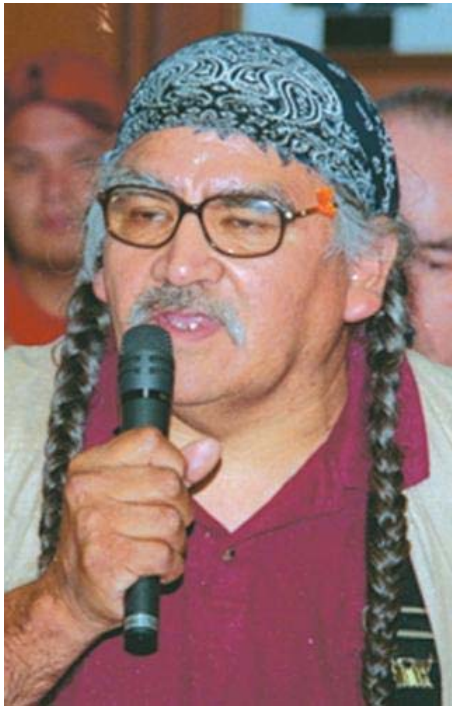
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Cowichan elder Arvid Charlie spoke on behalf of the Hul'qumi'num treaty Group before an international tribunal Tuesday.

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Cowichan elder speaks at international hearing

By Krista Siefken - Cowichan News Leader and Pictorial

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Seven minutes isn't a long time to illustrate the importance of Cowichan culture and territory, but Arvid Charlie thinks he's up to the challenge.

Charlie, a respected Cowichan Tribes elder, spoke on behalf of the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group and its members last night during an Inter-American Commission on Human Rights hearing in Washington, D.C.

The treaty group, which filed a complaint against Canada through the commission, asked Charlie to speak during the hearing to help the commission better understand the value of land and heritage to the six local bands that make up the Hul'qumi'num group.

"I have only a few minutes — six or seven minutes — and my concern is not being able to say enough in that six or seven minutes," Charlie told the News Leader Pictorial Monday.

The treaty group announced the complaint Friday afternoon, and met with the commission at 6 p.m. last night. During the hearing, both Charlie and lawyer Ron Williams spoke.

Charlie said the initial draft of his speech came in at 52 minutes in length, and he's had to whittle it down to meet the limit.

It was a tall order, but Charlie said he was honoured to represent his people and the lands they are fighting to protect.

"We use everything. The plants are both our food and our medications — out there, it's like a pharmacy to us," Charlie explained. "And we use certain areas for spiritual uses, like meditation, for cleansing of the body, emotions and spirit."

Charlie said he was selected to speak because of his deep knowledge of the Hul'qumi'num language and culture.

"It is a very great honour, and hopefully I'll do justice for all our people," he added. "I need to elaborate that it's not a dying or a dead culture — it's an ongoing culture, and it's still as strong today as it was yesteryear."

In fact, Charlie has been instrumental in seeing First Nations culture pass through to the next generation.

His son Charlie, for example, is a student of Arvid's.

"There are others within our community who are learning very deeply about our culture, too," he said. "We all want to keep that going."

While the outcome of the hearing was not available by press time Tuesday, it was attended by chiefs from the six Hul'qumi'num bands.

The treaty group's aim in taking its complaint to the international commission is to see increased Hul'qumi'num involvement in development on its traditional territory.

The complaint is the first of its kind from indigenous people in Canada. More commonly, the commission deals with human right abuses in countries like Nicaragua or Colombia.

The Canadian government, meanwhile, did not return calls for comment by Tuesday afternoon.

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