

“Protecting Inuit Human Rights in the Face of Global Climate Change”

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Good morning. I am very pleased to be here in Yellowknife, addressing CASHRA's 2007 conference on our work to make the world understand that global climate change is an issue of human rights. It is wonderful to be here with so many others whose work focuses on human rights and their power to protect and nurture our communities.

We come together at an auspicious time to discuss climate change after the enormous, but still inadequate, advances at the G8 summit last week.

To begin here today, it is important to provide you with some context of who I am and where I come from. I address you today as an Inuk, originally from Kuujjuaq, Nunavik now living in Iqaluit, and as a mother of two and a grandmother of one. I was

raised traditionally and started to learn English when I started school at the age of 6.

Our communities have, in my lifetime alone, gone through some incredible changes. For the first ten years of my life, I traveled only by dog team in the winter and canoe in the summer and fly by jumbo jet to many corners of the world. Changes have happened very quickly I my own lifetime.

Until last July when my term ended, I was the elected Chair of Inuit Circumpolar Council, representing the 155,000 Inuit of Russia, Alaska, Canada and Greenland internationally. From 1995 to 2002, I was President of ICC in Canada, and in

2002 I was elected to Chair the whole organization.

It has now been nearly a year since my term as chair of Inuit Circumpolar Council ended, and since then I have reflected on my journey through life, and thought deeply about where the Arctic is going and the future of Inuit as a people and a culture. My work has been about reminding people of their importance in the web of existence on this planet.

My core message is that we are all connected. Here in the Arctic, we may be far from the world's corridors of power, but the Inuk hunter who falls through the thinning sea ice whether in Alaska, Canada, Russia or Greenland is connected to the rising waters and stronger hurricanes which threaten

the Southern United States, to melting glaciers in the Andes and the Himalayas, to the flooding of low-lying and small island states. We must think of foreign policy, environmental and economic policy in the same breath.

As you all know here in the NWT, the Arctic is mentioned more and more in the global climate change debate. Why? Because the Arctic is the world's climate change barometer. Inuit are the mercury in that barometer. Our Hunters are the sentinels for the rest of the planet. What is happening now here will happen soon further south. And what is the Arctic barometer saying?

It has now been more than two decades since our Hunters and Elders began reporting melting

permafrost, thinning ice, receding glaciers, increased erosion, and unpredictable weather patterns.

As a people of the land, ice, and snow, our hunting culture, and the life it depends upon, thrives on the cold. Already we are having difficulty adapting to environmental changes as a result of climate change. With the thinning ice around Baffin Island, the accelerating retreat of the ice around Alaska and the Beaufort, and the increasingly unpredictable weather, Hunter have fallen through in places traditionally safe, and face riskier travel ever further from their communities each winter to find animals whose migratory patterns are shifting with the rapidly shifting ice flows.

Many of our impacts here are directly connected with those to the South. The Greenland Ice Cap,

which is melting at an unprecedented rate, holds enough water to add 7 metres to global sea-level rise. As that water is released, it is sinking small islands countries and low-lying states – heavily inhabited islands off the shores of India had to be abandoned just late last year. There are people from the small island developing states that are being relocated to New Zealand.

All that freshwater also has a dangerous impact on ocean currents that regulate the planet's temperature. As the ocean circulation is slowed down by adding freshwater from the Greenland Ice Cap, it is no longer able to cool down the waters of the Southern hemisphere. As the temperature of the waters in the Southern hemisphere rise, the intensity of hurricanes and cyclones will grow.

The Inuk hunter is the sentinel not only for the Arctic, but for people who have never even thought about the Arctic – last year National Geographic reported that over 200 million people live within three feet of the current sea-level.

The question is: how much longer will Inuit be able to be the planet's sentinels?

Responding, in part, to Inuit observations, Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the eight-nation Arctic Council in October 2000 authorized the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, the ACIA.

The Assessment was prepared over four years by more than 300 scientists from 15 countries with the close co-operation of Inuit, Sami, Gwich'in,

Athabascans, Aleut, and Indigenous peoples in Russia. When released in November 2004, newspapers around the world printed photos of melting glaciers, disappearing summer sea ice and stressed polar bears.

Many of you are probably familiar with the ACIA, so I will read just two of its conclusions:

Marine species dependent on sea ice, including polar bears, ice-living seals, walrus, and some marine birds, are very likely to decline, with some species facing extinction.

And

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, and possibly become extinct.

Inuit are adaptable and resourceful. But the ACIA foresees a time—well within the lifetime of my nine-year old grandson—when environmental change will be so great that Inuit will no longer be able to maintain our hunting culture. Global warming has become the ultimate threat to Inuit culture and to our survival as an Indigenous people.

The science released since the ACIA has only presented a starker picture. The 4th reports from the working groups of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, released this year, have ended the scientific debate on the causes of climate change, and recognized the rapid retreat of our polar ice sheet. More recent science, published in the Journal

Nature, predicted that our Arctic Ocean may be free of ice by the summer of 2040 - 33 years from now. Several weeks ago, a team from Oxford released a study pushing that date even further forward; they foresee an ice-free passage across the Pole by 2020.

Although we had a cold and long spring this year, as things are now very unpredictable, let me tell you that the changes on Baffin Island are getting harder and harder to ignore. Two Februarys ago in Iqaluit, it was 8° when it should have been -30°. It was raining when it should have been snowing. We understand that weather is inherently variable, but this is beyond our experience. This winter, hunters around the Cumberland sound were still waiting, at the end of February, for the ice to freeze hard enough for travel. Hunters reported ice so thin this

year that baby seals were falling through their ice dens into the water.

The nations of the world, including Canada, have signed and ratified the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the UNFCCC, 15 years ago.

The convention's objective, and I am quoting, is to:

Stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. Such a level should be achieved within a time-frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.

Fine words, but “dangerous” climate change is already taking place here in the North. Already our subsistence food production—hunting, fishing and gathering—is threatened. The objective of the convention is being breached here and now in the Arctic.

Deep and co-ordinated reductions in emissions of GHGs by the developed and developing worlds is required to forestall the future projected in the ACIA. Targets and timetables are needed. There is no getting around this.

At global climate change negotiations people rush from meeting to meeting arguing all sorts of narrow technical points. The bigger picture, the cultural picture, the human picture, is being lost. Climate

change is about families, parents, children, and the lives we lead in our communities. We have to regain this human perspective if we are to slow and eventually stop human-induced climate change.

Inuit are a remarkable and adaptable people. We weathered the storm of modernization remarkably well, going from dog-teams and igloos to ski-dooes, jumbo jets, permanent homes, and even supermarkets, all with a few decades. As you know, these enormous changes to our communities were not without consequences. Substance abuse, health problems, and the loss of so many of our people, especially young men, to suicide, have been the results. But through all of this, we have had our land, and the wisdom our Hunters and Elders have gained from it over millennia, to help us adapt.

We remain a hunting people of the land, ice, and snow. Hunting for us is not just about killing animals. The process of the hunt and eating of our country food personifies what it means to be Inuit. It is on the land that values and age-old knowledge are passed down from generation to generation.

The process of the hunt teaches young Inuit to be patient, courageous, bold under pressure, and reflective. They learn to control their impulses, to withstand stress, and to have sound judgment and ultimately the wisdom to carry out a plan and achieve a goal. Let me repeat—our hunting culture is tied to the land and its animals. This is why, for us, climate change is an issue of our right and ability to exist as an Indigenous people.

Earlier I quoted the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, and its dire predictions for the future of our culture. The ACIA pulled no punches; it concluded that your age-old culture and economy was doomed, that our ancient way of life was destined to become a footnote in the history of globalization.

I will tell you a bit about how we responded. In December 2005, following more than two years of preparation, we submitted a 175 page climate change-related petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. As well as myself, the petition was filed on behalf of 62 Inuit from northern Canada and northern Alaska on behalf of all Inuit in Canada and Alaska. Nine of those 62 are from Sachs Harbour here in the NWT.

Our petition asked the commission to come to the Arctic to see what climate change is doing to our environment and to us. We sought a declaration that the destruction of the Arctic environment and the culture and economy of Inuit as a result of virtually unrestricted emissions of greenhouse gases by the United States—the source of approximately 25 percent of the world’s emissions—was violating our human rights as guaranteed in the 1948 American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man.

What are our rights specified in the 1948 declaration that are being violated? The petition specified:

1. the right to life and physical security;
2. the right to personal property;
3. the right to health;
4. the right to practice our culture;

5. the right to use land traditionally used and occupied; and
6. The right to the means of subsistence.

In terms of relief, we asked the commission to recommend that the United States:

1. Adopt mandatory measures to limit its emissions of greenhouse gases in co-operation with the community of nations;
2. Take into account the impact of US greenhouse gas emissions on the Arctic and Inuit before approving all major government actions;
3. In consultation with Inuit, develop a plan to protect Inuit culture and the Arctic environment and mitigate any harm caused by US greenhouse gas emissions; and

4. In co-operation with Inuit, develop a plan to help Inuit adapt to unavoidable climate change impacts.

These were reasonable and responsible suggestions. They are the sort of things governments of any and every political stripe should be doing anyway to protect and help their citizens, and to promote sustainable development.

Let me state very clearly that this petition was not about money. We were not seeking damages or compensation. We simply asked that the United States to stop violating our rights.

The purpose of the petition was to educate and encourage the Government of the United States to join the community of nations in a global campaign

to combat climate change. It was not aggressive or confrontational. We were reaching out, not striking out. However, it was a powerful and assertive legal defense of our human rights.

In a very real sense our petition was a “gift” from Inuit hunters and elders to the world. It was an act of generosity from an ancient culture deeply tied to the natural environment and still in tune with its wisdom, to an urban, industrial, and “modern” culture that has largely lost its sense of place and position in the natural world.

In November of last year, the commission informed us that they had rejected the petition *at that time*, seemingly on technical grounds. We responded immediately, requesting that the commission at the very least begin investigating climate change’s

impacts on the human rights of the peoples of the Americas.

The commission responded, and on the 1st of March this year, hosted its first historical hearing on the links between climate change and human rights. I presented, along with the lawyers who helped prepare the original petition.

It is our hope that this first session will result in a string of hearings to investigate these rights violations, and in declarations from the Commission down the road. From the Arctic, we have opened the door, but we have always done this work, and shared this message, for all of the peoples of the world.

Through our efforts, we have put the human face, and in this case the Inuit face, front and central.

Many of you who have worked through international forums know just how stale, and removed from reality, the international negotiations can become. Our work helped change the international discourse on climate change from a dry technical and economic debate to discussions about human values and human rights – we gave the United Nations Climate Change Conference a heartbeat, a renewed sense of urgency. We did this simply by reminding people far away from the Arctic that the Inuk hunter falling through the thinning ice is connected to the cars they drive, to the policies they make, to the laws they choose to enforce.

Climate change is perhaps the biggest challenge we face as a human collective. Global warming is overarching, complex, and requires urgent and

immediate action. We understand from climate change science that our window of opportunity is only 10-15 years. Co-ordinated action by all states from the developed and developing worlds is required to forestall the future projected in the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment.

Our work with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has been a means of inviting the United States to talk with us and to put this global issue in a human rights context—where it belongs. Our intent is to encourage and to inform. In democracies, public opinion usually becomes public policy. The massive up-swelling of popular support for climate change action in the U.S. this year are all very encouraging signs. Just last week, the G8 (including Canada and the U.S.) announced plans to

pursue a real deal on climate change at this year's upcoming UN Climate Change Conference this Fall. At last, public opinion is moving our way, and is beginning to shape public policy.

Our petition aimed to change hearts, minds and the climate change policy of the United States. It was our means to turn public opinion into public policy. The Inuit sentinels have now used the tools of human rights to share how the cars we drive and the energy decisions we make are connected to hunters falling through the thinning ice, to families being lost in more violent storms as they are forced further onto the seas to catch the ice edge to feed their families, to whole ice sheets melting into a rising sea.

Let me finish by once more thanking the NWT Human Rights Commission for inviting me here to speak to you all this morning, and for recognizing the continuing importance of our work.

I am grateful for the opportunity to travel here to Yellowknife to share our message with so many others working to strengthen and uphold human rights across our nation. Please remember, if we work together to protect the Arctic, we may yet save the planet.

Thank You.