

B.C. chiefs take landmark case to top court

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OTTAWA — Hereditary chiefs from British Columbia are taking their lengthy, expensive fight for aboriginal rights to the country's top court today in what has been called the most important land-claims case in Canadian history.

The landmark case involves the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en bands of northern B.C.

"At stake is the legal, and ultimately political foundation of the existence of First Nations in British Columbia," says Grand Chief Ed John, a prominent aboriginal leader in B.C.

The case is back in court for two days of arguments after negotiations broke down between the federal and provincial governments and Gitksan negotiators in 1996. The chiefs want ownership of public property plus forestry, fishing, mining and water rights.

The Delgam Uukw case — named after one of the 35 Gitksan chiefs — revolves around a 1984 claim from the two first nations for ownership and jurisdiction over 57,000 square kilometres of northwestern B.C. — an area roughly the size of Nova Scotia.

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