

Gitxsan Treaty Society

Box 229
Hazelton, B.C.
V0J 1Y0

(250) 842-6780
fax: (250) 842-6709
gto@mail.bulkley.net

MEDIA ALERT

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For immediate release

Gitxsan talk treaty with Premier

GITXSAN TERRITORIES – The first concrete step is about to take place after a more than five-year hiatus in treaty negotiations between the Gitxsan hereditary chiefs, B.C. and Canada on ownership, jurisdiction and self-government.

Premier Ujal Dosanjh will sit down with the hereditary chiefs at a public meeting in Gitxsan traditional territory in Northwest B.C. on May 6. The main topic for discussion is the provincial government's position on implementing the 1997 Supreme Court of Canada's Delgamuukw decision on aboriginal title says Gitxsan Treaty Society chair Anuthlem buhn (Gordon Sebastian).

"The flavour of the meeting is discussing the constitutional obligation of the government to reconcile prior occupation of the land by the Gitxsan with B.C.'s assertion of Crown sovereignty through such means as the Forest Act, the Municipal Act or the Highways Act," says Anuthlem buhn.

The Gitxsan, and other First Nations, have long-standing actions under way to prove aboriginal title, especially regarding the question of ownership and jurisdiction of forest resources on the land. A clear articulation of the B.C.'s position on the Delgamuukw decision will go a long way to improving the pace of negotiations at the treaty table.

"Not knowing B.C.'s position on aboriginal title as outlined in the Supreme Court of Canada's decision adds to uncertainty. That uncertainty isn't good for anyone living up here – natives and non-natives alike. If their negotiators can come into these talks with a clear mandate, then progress can really be made. That wasn't the case last time the Gitxsan were involved with the B.C. treaty process," says Anuthlem buhn.

The Gitxsan haven't been involved with treaty negotiations since 1996 when the province decided to suspend their participation with the Gitxsan and Canada in the B.C. Treaty Commission process in favour of pursuing the Delgamuukw court action. The subsequent SCC decision helped clarify the "test" for legally proving aboriginal title, but also strongly ruled it an obligation of B.C. and Canada to conduct meaningful consultation and negotiations with First Nations. The B.C. Treaty Commission announced in February it accepted the reopening of the Gitxsan treaty process after all three parties negotiated a return to the table.

Consultation and negotiations is what the SCC said -- consultation does not include the use of referenda on aboriginal title points out Anuthlem buhn.

"The B.C. Liberal party wants to use a referendum when it comes to treaty-making. We think a referendum will really isolate the aboriginal people and isolate the non-Indian people because Gitxsan are a majority in our area. Holding referendums on treaty agreements will create conflict and chaos. It won't add certainty in any way and certainty on the land question is really what we need to help get our local economy going again."

The meeting with Premier Dosanjh begins at 1:30 p.m. at Tse Kyah Gathering Place community hall in Hagwilget. Also present will be representatives of the Wet'suwet'en, Gitanyow and Tahltan.

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For more information contact: Anuthlem buhn (Gordon Sebastian), chair, Gitxsan Treaty Society
(250) 842-6780/ (250) 842-0078/ (250) 847-9224