

KAIROS urgent action: Cree community of Attawapiskat, Ontario calls a state of emergency as hundreds face winter in tents and sheds. Updated 1 December 2011

Summary

In early November the Attawapiskat First Nation in northern Ontario took the extraordinary step of declaring a state of emergency. Faced with the beginning of winter, overcrowded housing and over one hundred people who have no houses at all, Chief Theresa Spence asked the federal and provincial government to recognize a state of emergency; to consider a temporary evacuation of the community; and to reach agreement on the funding needed to build housing, supply clean drinking water, and build the new elementary school that has been promised for years.

At the time of writing no timeline on emergency government assistance has been offered. [Click here to read KAIROS' commentary on this situation.](#) Temperatures at James Bay are dropping fast. People may die if nothing is done.

KAIROS believes that all Canadians support the basic human right to safe housing, health, education, and clean water. Currently the people of Attawapiskat lack all of these. We also believe that as a society we have more than enough money to ensure that all people's basic needs are met. The real issues are the funding choices we make, and the continued lack of self-determination and access to their traditional lands that face the vast majority of Aboriginal communities.

What you can do:

Please support the people of Attawapiskat. Christians are in the season of Advent, a time of waiting, hope and celebration. KAIROS asks you to include Attawapiskat in your Advent prayers or the prayers of your own faith tradition, and to invite people to write letters and cards to MPs. (*Attawapiskat is pronounced At-ah-WAH-pis-kat.*)

Call or write to the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, John Duncan; the Ontario Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Kathleen Wynne; your Member of Parliament; and (if you live in Ontario) your Member of Provincial Parliament. Do this as individuals or as a class, group or faith community. Consider asking your MP for a meeting when she or he is home on the Parliamentary break. (See contact information below.)

Ask them to:

- Immediately prioritize emergency funding that will provide safe housing for everyone this winter, and/or evacuation, as community members wish. Please acknowledge the \$2.5 million Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Duncan recently committed with conditions, but note that much more must be done to address the problem, and that funds must move very quickly.
- Work with the First Nation, the government of Ontario, and the federal government to ensure long-term funding to cover the costs of constructing new houses, a safe water and sanitation system, and a replacement elementary school.
- Please stress that Canadians in any kind of crisis should not be caught in funding disputes between differing levels of government. This is a common and very troubling situation for Indigenous communities.

Please add your personal thoughts.

Further reading (KAIROS offers these as background information only, not as an endorsement)

[Statement by Attawapiskat Chief and Council on notice of Third Party intervention](#)

The June 2011 Auditor General's report includes [a chapter dedicated to infrastructure on First Nations reserves](#) ([PDF version](#)).

[Aboriginal blog with a plain-language Q&A on what's going on in Attawapiskat](#)

[What if They Declared an Emergency and No One Came?](#) By Charlie Angus, Member of Parliament for Timmins-James Bay

[Honouring the Children](#): KAIROS and First Nations Child and Family Caring Society shadow report to the UN review of Canada's compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (*This resource is designed to be read by high school students and older. Bulk print copies are available for churches and classrooms. Please enquire at orders@kairoscanada.org.*)

[CBC article examining the housing crisis on reserves](#) and [CBC article examining the water crisis on reserves](#)

[Shannen's Dream: First Nations Child and Family Caring Society](#)

[Video: Ontario Aboriginal people need housing help](#) (CBC)

[Video: Canadian Geographic on Attawapiskat school](#)

[Interview with Mike Koostachin, community member, about the De Beers Diamond mine](#)

Contact information:

[Find your Member of Parliament using your postal code](#). Mail may be sent postage-free to any Member at the following address: House of Commons, Parliament Buildings, Ottawa, Ontario. Canada, K1A 0A6

Hon. John Duncan, federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development: minister@aadnc-aandc.gc.ca or Hon John Duncan, Parliament Buildings, Ottawa, Ontario. Canada, K1A 0A6 (no postage needed). Phone: 819-997-0002 FAX: 819 953 4941

Hon. Kathleen Wynne, Ontario Aboriginal Affairs Minister: minister.maa@ontario.ca

Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs
160 Bloor St. East, 4th floor
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
M7A 2E6

Ontario Members of the Provincial Parliament:

http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/members/member_addresses.do?locale=en

Please send copies of your letters to: Ed Bianchi (Indigenous Rights coordinator, KAIROS) ebianchi@kairoscanada.org and Julie Graham (Education Coordinator, Dignity and Rights, KAIROS) jgraham@kairoscanada.org or 310 Dupont St, Suite 200, Toronto ON M5R 1V9. Thank you!

Background

Dr. Elizabeth Blackmore, one of 15 family doctors for the James Bay coast, said at a recent press conference on Attawapiskat, "I often have to remind myself that I am still working in the province of Ontario... From a medical perspective, we see this as an emergency and that something has to be done." She said the overcrowding and lack of hygiene present in the community lead to increased infectious diseases, scabies, lice, respiratory problems and acute depression. Substance abuse and suicide often follow.

The Member of Parliament for the area, Charlie Angus, writes: "Two weeks ago I travelled to this community on the James Bay coast to see why conditions had become so extreme that local leaders felt compelled to declare a state of emergency..."

I spoke with one family of six who had been living in a tiny tent for two years. I visited elderly people living in sheds without water or electricity. I met children whose idea of a toilet was a plastic bucket that was dumped into the ditch in front of their shack.

Presently there are five families living in tents; 19 families living in sheds without running water; 35 families living in houses needing serious repair; 128 families living in houses condemned from black mould and failing infrastructure; 118 families living with relatives (often 20 people in a small home); there are 90 people living in a construction trailer. There's a need for 268 houses just to deal with the immediate backlog of homelessness.

Try to imagine this situation happening in anywhere else in this country."

MPP Gilles Bisson (Timmins-James Bay) also travelled to the community and said some homes are heated exclusively by halved 45-gallon drums used as wood stoves. This greatly increases fire hazard and the incidence of accidental burns. "The federal government knows most people will never visit Attawapiskat, no one will ever see it. I don't think most people know how bad it is but if the average citizen sees it, they'll become an advocate in two minutes", Mr. Bisson said.

Attawapiskat has been in the news before. Like other communities in the area, its drinking water is not clean. Sewage infrastructure is so poor that parts of the community have been evacuated before due to leaks into buildings and the water supply. It's been 12 years since the community's grade school was shut down because children were being exposed to dangerous levels of benzene from the badly contaminated ground. Frustrated students finally took matters into their own hands. They were led by 13-year-old Shannen Koostachin, who launched a national campaign to shame the government into action. She was killed in a road accident at age 15 while living outside of her community to attend school. Now other students and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society carry on a campaign in her name - *Shannen's Dream*. But still the school has not been rebuilt.

90 kilometres from Attawapiskat is the De Beers Victor mine, located on Cree traditional territory. Recently the province raised the royalty tax at the mine from nine per cent to 11 per cent to ensure an even higher return for the provincial coffers. No provincial royalty money comes back to help the community with infrastructure or development.

Under the Indian Act, First Nations receive funding for housing from the federal government, as part of the Treaty agreement. People living on reserve can own the building, but not the land underneath it, since it is owned collectively by the First Nation.

When it comes to basic needs that are usually a provincial responsibility, like housing, health and education, Aboriginal communities must instead work with the federal government. Disputes about funding between provincial or territorial and federal governments can mean that resources many Canadians take for granted are held up for years. In their November 23 open letter to the Prime Minister and the Ontario Premier, the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario says, "People need warm, safe shelter, reliable plumbing, nutritious food, and safe drinking water to be healthy. We need our leaders to put aside jurisdictional squabbles in the interests of preventing a humanitarian disaster in Attawapiskat."

Mr. Angus offers a note of hope: "Since the state of emergency was declared, my office has been inundated with people wanting to help. I have been contacted by school kids trying to raise money for supplies; trades people who want to come north to help in a rebuilding project; average Canadians who simply ask -- what can I do?"

As inspiring as this is, it's clear that nothing will really change until there is action from the officials whose job it is to ensure that these citizens of Ontario and Canada are treated with a basic level of respect and dignity. The cold winter winds are hitting James Bay. People may die if nothing is done. In a country as rich and as just as Canada this is simply unacceptable."

[Click here to read KAIROS' commentary on the federal government's actions to date.](#)



2011-12 education for action campaign: *Truth, Reconciliation and Equity- They Matter to Us!*

<http://www.kairoscanada.org/take-action/truth-equity-reconciliation/>

KAIROS unites eleven Canadian churches and religious communities in faithful action for ecological justice and human rights.