

Aboriginal protesters kick off weeklong protest at Ont. legislature

May 26, 2008 - 7:43 pm

By: Tobi Cohen, THE CANADIAN PRESS

TORONTO - The property rights of all Ontario residents are being threatened by archaic mining laws that allow companies to stake land anywhere they like, aboriginal protesters said Monday before a swelling crowd that gathered on a the front lawn of the provincial legislature to demand change.

And if the province doesn't act now to change the Mining Act, politicians can expect another Ipperwash, an emotional Darryl Sainnawap, one of six Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI) First Nation members who were jailed over a dispute with a mining exploration company said in reference to the infamous 1995 aboriginal standoff that ended in the fatal shooting of protester Dudley George by police.

Among the guests of honour at the multi-day sit-in that's expected to culminate with Thursday's national aboriginal Day of Action, Sainnawap thanked the crowd for supporting him while he was in jail and called on the government to negotiate.

"I personally want to call on the provincial government to come to the table and see if we can find a resolution," he said before the mass of several hundred, which included aboriginal groups from across the province and beyond as well as labour groups and environmentalists.

"But I would also like to say our land comes first... Ontario says get on board, get out of the way, or go to jail. We cannot compromise our children's future."

Sainnawap, along with KI Chief Donny Morris, deputy chief Jack McKay and members Sam McKay, Cecilia Begg and Bruce Sakakeep, were all released from jail temporarily on Friday after agreeing to abide by an injunction that prohibits them from interfering with the operations of Platinex Inc., a mining company that's seeking to drill on KI land about 600 kilometres north of Thunder Bay, Ont.

The decision was made only after Platinex promised not to bring an exploration crew onto the disputed land before 9 a.m. Thursday.

The group dubbed the KI 6 is due back in court Wednesday where they are appealing their six-month sentence for contempt of court. The Ontario Appeals Court could decide they've served enough time and release them or send them back to jail to serve out the remainder of their sentence.

The brief reprieve, however, gave them the opportunity to join fellow KI members as well as colleagues from Ardoch Algonquin First Nations in eastern Ontario and Grassy Narrows First Nation near Kenora, Ont. All three groups organized the event, originally aimed in part at calling for their release.

Bob Lovelace of Ardoch Algonquin First Nation still remains in jail in solitary confinement on a hunger strike for a similar breach involving a uranium exploration company.

The group called for his release and also played a recording he made from jail to share with the crowd.

In it, Lovelace called for an end to "colonialism" and compared the situation of Canada's aboriginals to that of organized labour and apartheid South Africa.

"Our time is now and I say that any political party or government in Canada that defends and perpetuates colonialism is not fit to govern," he said to much applause.

Earlier in the day, Morris said he was anticipating a peaceful event, though he suggested organizers were getting some blow back from authorities.

Morris said it was curious that security guards were giving them a hard time about using tent pegs on the lawn of the legislature, yet mining companies could stake their land any time they like.

"They've been throwing hurdles in our way from what I gather. Trying to discourage us from doing this," he said, adding he's "directed the membership to hold back."

"I'm not trying to encourage violence or foul language... I like the way we're travelling right now on the road. Peaceful, trying to communicate, putting out press releases, using the Internet. That's how I want to work."

Noting Ontario came to his community in 1929 to sign a treaty, Morris said KI ought to be involved in the revamping of the Mining Act and suggested there's been no such consultation as of yet.

He also encouraged non-aboriginals to get involved as it's an issue that comes down to property rights and the environment which effect everybody.

"If you have private property, a cottage on a lake, you are in the same boat as us," he said. "You don't own the land."

Toting flags and placards, the protesters erected three teepees on the lawn and are expected to camp out overnight and spend the coming days holding traditional aboriginal ceremonies as well as workshops. Guest speakers are also expected throughout the week.

Premier Dalton McGuinty reaffirmed earlier in the day that the province is committed to changing the Mining Act, but that it will take time.

He said current laws are very much tied into the economy but he nonetheless recognizes the government must also take into account aboriginal and environmental concerns.

"I think it falls on my generation of leadership to do something about this because I don't think what we have in place is... in keeping with our standards, our values and our aspirations," he said, adding changing it will have a "ripple effect" on jobs.

"We can't just dismiss that."