

THE EMERGENCY IN ATTAWAPISKAT

Introduction

Focus

This *News in Review* story examines the desperate situation facing the First Nations community of Attawapiskat, the federal government's handling of it, and public reaction to the emergency.

Canadians are proud to describe their country as “the True North strong and free.” This conjures up a mental image of a magnificent, resource-rich land reaching all the way to the Arctic as far as the North Pole. But the media pictures coming out of Attawapiskat, a First Nations community located on James Bay, were anything but magnificent when they began to appear in late 2011. Residents of Attawapiskat were shown preparing for winter in accommodation totally inadequate for any season. Many families were housed in tents, trailers, and plywood shacks—in some cases without running water, electricity, and indoor plumbing. And, primitive as most housing was, it was also overcrowded; in several cases one home was shared by more than one family.

The plight of the reserve's residents only came to light when the band council declared a state of emergency, asking that inadequately housed residents be evacuated before winter set in. The band council saw its emergency declaration as a necessary measure to gain the attention of the federal government, and it worked—but not exactly as planned.

First to respond to the community was not Ottawa but the Canadian Red Cross, mounting the kind of operation it usually carries out for a natural disaster abroad. In this case the CRC co-ordinated a donation campaign and bought generators, heaters, blankets, and winter clothing for the community. It

also agreed to work with Attawapiskat residents to find temporary solutions for the lack of proper plumbing.

The federal government first responded to the emergency declaration by placing Attawapiskat under third-party management. This meant that the band no longer would have the right to determine how the funds it received would be spent or how much it could allocate for its priorities. Ottawa agreed to release additional funds to deal with the emergency, but they would be controlled by a temporary manager who was not a member of the reserve. Few decisions could have been more upsetting to Attawapiskat's leaders. They accused the government of punishing the community for drawing attention to its problems and refused to allow the manager into the town. As of late January 2012, he continued to direct financial operations from an outside location.

After Prime Minister Harper's moving residential schools apology to First Nations peoples in June 2008, many Canadians looked forward to a new era of improved relations between the government and aboriginal peoples. If nothing else, the Attawapiskat crisis shows that tensions still exist, that many First Nations people still face deep-rooted social and economic problems, and that a re-examination of the fundamentals of the relationship between aboriginal Canadians and the federal government is long overdue.

To Consider

1. Why were Canadians shocked by media images of housing conditions in the remote First Nations community of Attawapiskat in late 2011?
2. How did the federal government respond to this community's emergency?
3. Does the federal government have a moral responsibility to address the problems facing Attawapiskat and other First Nations communities with similar problems? Why or why not?

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Video Review

Pre-viewing Questions

During the current crisis in Attawapiskat, Chief Theresa Spence said that conditions on the reserve were so bad that they were worse than those in a Third World nation. Attawapiskat, she said, was a “Fourth World nation.” What kinds of living conditions would you expect to find in a “Fourth World nation”? Make a list of at least five of these conditions. Compare your list with those of two of your classmates. After watching the video, compare your list with what you have seen as the actual conditions in Attawapiskat.

Viewing Questions

Record your responses to the following questions in the spaces provided.

1. How many people live in Attawapiskat?

2. How many families are living in condemned housing?

3. How many reserves are currently under boil-water advisories?

4. What has the federal government decided to do to deal with funding issues in Attawapiskat?

5. How far in debt is the Attawapiskat community?

6. How did the community respond to the appointment of a third-party manager?

7. How many homes could be built in Attawapiskat for \$1-million?

8. How will the new modular homes be brought to Attawapiskat?

9. How many unfinished homes are currently sitting empty in Attawapiskat?

10. How are Lindy Mudd and his family planning to deal with conditions in Attawapiskat?

Post-viewing Discussion

1. Compare the lists you made of five conditions you would expect to find in a "Fourth World nation" that you made before viewing the video with those completed after viewing. How are they different?

2. Lindy Mudd and his family speak of their need to leave the community so the kids don't "fall through the cracks." What changes do you think could be made to make Attawapiskat a better place for young people?

3. Some commentators have expressed the view that reserves like Attawapiskat are simply too isolated to survive and that the residents should be relocated closer to larger Canadian centres. How do you think the people of Attawapiskat would respond to that argument?

4. Some of the band leaders in Attawapiskat, joined by chiefs from across Canada, have asked the United Nations to determine if the federal government is living up to international obligations to respect Canada's aboriginal peoples. Should the United Nations do so? How would you expect the federal government to respond to this request? (Note that the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People was adopted in 2007; Canada signed on in 2010.)

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Background to the Crisis

Further Research

Extensive CBC coverage of the housing crisis on First Nations reserves, including video clips, is available at www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2011/12/12/f-video-first-nation-housing.html.

Further Research

The Nishnawabe Aski website is at www.nan.on.ca.

Quote

The Globe and Mail (September 22, 1993) editorialized: "The biggest problem facing communities such as Attawapiskat appears to be very simple: there is next to nothing to do. There are limited recreational and educational opportunities for the young; limited work opportunities for everyone else."

Focus for Reading

As you read this section, note the main developments in the unfolding emergency in Attawapiskat in chronological order, using a chart like the one below to summarize your information.

Time Span	Main Developments
A Long-running Problem	
Enter De Beers and the Victor Mine	
The Emergencies Continue	
The 2011 Crisis	

The housing crisis in Attawapiskat did not suddenly develop in 2011. Nor is it the only problem the community has been dealing with in recent years. In fact it was the third time in three years that the band council declared a state of emergency.

Like many isolated northern communities, Attawapiskat struggles with many problems, including unemployment, poverty, and substance abuse. It is unfortunate that it often takes a major crisis to draw the attention of the rest of Canada to conditions in First Nations communities in the northern regions of the country.

A Long-running Problem

In 1993, Attawapiskat was in the news because a 17-year-old boy killed himself while high from sniffing gasoline. Alcohol abuse had long been a problem for Attawapiskat, and in 1991 the band council banned its use in the community. What it couldn't ban, however, is gasoline. Gasoline is fundamental

to the hunting economy of northern communities, powering snowmobiles in the winter and boats in the summer. For at least 50 of the 800 children and teens living in Attawapiskat, gasoline became the intoxicant of choice. But not just in Attawapiskat; in 1993 alone, 23 young people died in solvent-related incidents in the 46 Northern Ontario First Nations communities that make up the Nishnawabe Aski Nation (NAN).

At the time of the 1993 solvent-related deaths, media stories noted that Attawapiskat residents had a great deal of pride in their community. But they also pointed out some major problems. About 90 per cent of the residents were on welfare. Housing was, for the most part, cheaply and poorly constructed. That housing was overcrowded; 203 families were on a waiting list for new homes to be built. The band council was \$2-million in debt and unable to finish homes already under construction, let alone build new ones.

Further Research

The Victor Mine website is at www.debeerscanada.com/files_3/victor-mine.php. The Attawapiskat Resources website is at www.arinc.ca.

Another blow to the community came in 2000, when the elementary school was forced to close. A diesel spill in 1979 had polluted the property on which the school stood; dangerous conditions finally forced the school's closing in 2000. Students were moved to a series of portables and remain there to this day. After several protests by Attawapiskat students, the federal government has promised to build a new school for the community in the coming year.

Enter De Beers and the Victor Mine

In the early 2000s, De Beers, the world's largest diamond mining company, began plans to develop an operation called the Victor Mine about 90 kilometres west of Attawapiskat on traditional First Nations land. In 2005 the company signed an impact benefit statement (IBA) with the Attawapiskat First Nation.

The IBA promised the community \$2-million per year, with that amount to increase if and when the mine becomes profitable. De Beers has also promised to train and hire as many aboriginal workers as possible for the project. During the construction period, about 800 First Nations people from the James Bay area were employed. Of the permanent work force of about 450, some 60 per cent are aboriginal.

De Beers has signed \$325-million in contracts with First Nations companies since construction began in 2006. One of the real beneficiaries is Attawapiskat Resources, a corporation wholly owned by the Attawapiskat First Nation. It is involved in many of the day-to-day operations at the mine.

But Theresa Spence, the Attawapiskat chief, speaks for many First Nations people when she argues that the community should receive even more from sharing its resources. "Great riches are being taken from our land for the benefit of others, including the

governments of Canada and Ontario. They receive huge royalty payments and we receive so little. Herein lies the real problem affecting First Nations—the ability to develop communities with no financial basis." (*National Post*, January 26, 2012)

The Emergencies Continue

In May 2008 Attawapiskat was back in the news when hundreds of residents had to be evacuated because of fears of flooding caused by ice jams in the Attawapiskat River. About 900 people were flown to Hearst, Kapuskasing, and Greenstone until the threat subsided. 2009 was a year of constant conflict between Attawapiskat and the federal and Ontario governments. In April, the band council closed both of the community's schools and declared a state of emergency because of air quality concerns. The concerns arose when demolishing the condemned elementary school (which had been closed in 2000) caused a strong diesel smell in the community. According to New Democratic Party MP Charlie Angus: "We have 61 homes in the area where people have experienced symptoms ranging from headaches to nausea, vomiting, kids passing out in classrooms, nosebleeds . . . Those are classic symptoms of benzene (poisoning). We've got to do something here" (*Toronto Star*, April 10, 2009). The federal government insisted that testing indicated there were no health risks.

Three months later a sewage back-up destroyed eight buildings housing 90 people. The band council declared another emergency. Neither government agreed to evacuate the affected residents, insisting that the emergency plan called for displaced families to be accommodated in Attawapiskat. The band council chose to evacuate them anyway, insisting there was nowhere in the community for them

Did you know . . .

On January 24, 2012, the Prime Minister and government officials met with more than 400 chiefs from across Canada. The chiefs hope that this might mark the beginning of a real dialogue with Ottawa on the need to address the issues behind the emergency in Attawapiskat and other remote First Nations communities across Canada.

to stay. De Beers provided two temporary trailers to accommodate the families once they returned. The families are still in those trailers today.

The 2011 Crisis

On October 28, 2011, Chief Theresa Spence called yet another state of emergency in Attawapiskat, citing inadequate housing for many in the community as they faced severe winter conditions. In November she travelled to Toronto to ask the Ontario Legislature to evacuate members of the community until the housing situation improved. “At the moment it really is a crisis we are facing. . . . We are in a Third World situation. I think we must do that (evacuate) because they are not in a safe environment right now and winter is coming” (*Toronto Star*, November 19, 2011).

This time the media were definitely paying attention, and the story received attention not only in Canada but also around the world. Canadians were appalled to see and read about conditions in Attawapiskat.

Governments were slow to respond to pressure from the community and other parts of Canada. First response came from the Canadian Red Cross, announcing that it would do all it could to prepare the community for winter conditions. John Saunders, the organization’s director of disaster management for Ontario, spoke to *The*

Globe and Mail (November 28, 2011): “What we are focusing on is to make sure they have beds to sleep on while they are in those tents, as opposed to sleeping on the floor, having warm blankets, sleeping bags, generators. We’re also going to be looking with the community to address some temporary sanitation solutions, so that people aren’t using buckets as toilets.”

In December, the community and Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Duncan agreed on a stability plan to meet with the immediate needs of the community. Emergency supplies would continue to be flown into Attawapiskat. As soon as possible, a retrofit would be completed at the community healing centre so it could accommodate families through the winter. And 22 new modular homes would be brought in over the winter ice road to provide new housing in the long term.

Nonetheless, relations between the federal government and the Attawapiskat band council remained strained. The government, questioning the council’s past use of government funding, appointed a representative to oversee the band’s financing. The band refused to allow him entry to the reserve. Although the third-party manager is intended to serve only until the emergency is resolved, he continues to control the band’s finances for the foreseeable future.

Follow-up

1. With a partner or in a small group, compare the information you recorded in your summary charts about the main developments in the emergency in Attawapiskat. Help each other complete any missing information.
2. Why do you think the problems in Attawapiskat did not attract widespread media and public attention prior to the 2011 emergency?
3. Do you think that public concern about this emergency will lead to a serious effort on the part of the federal government to address it in a meaningful way? Why or why not?

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Political Responses

This section of the guide contains the comments of many of the individuals directly involved in the crisis at Attawapiskat. As you read the quotations, determine which, if any, of the four categories below that they fall into, using the chart that follows to organize your responses.

Many of the reporters and commentators covering the recent Attawapiskat housing crisis agreed on one thing: the responses of governments, members of opposition parties, and First Nations leaders were typical of those offered during previous crises. Those responses included:

1. Disagreement between the federal and provincial governments over responsibility for responding to the emergency declaration.
2. The opposition parties blaming the government for conditions on the reserves.
3. The federal government defending its funding policies and pointing the finger at mismanagement by the community's band council.
4. The community, supported by other First Nations chiefs from across Canada, accusing the government of blaming instead of helping the victims.

Source of Quotation	Category of Response
Charlie Angus	
Kathleen Wynne	
Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario	
John Duncan	
Stephen Harper	
Theresa Spence	

Charlie Angus

Charlie Angus is a member of the New Democratic Party and the MP for Timmins-James Bay (the riding of which Attawapiskat is a part). Angus has been a strong spokesperson for the rights of First Nations communities and helped focus media attention on the housing crisis in Attawapiskat. Writing on December 2, 2011, for the online political periodical the *Huffington Post* in the U.S., Angus described the Attawapiskat crisis as “Canada’s Katrina moment,” setting the tone for a nasty debate: “Attawapiskat is Canada’s Katrina moment. The bumbling inaction from Minister John Duncan certainly resembles the Bush government and the FEMA response. But on a more symbolic

level, Harper’s response to Attawapiskat exposes an ugly, underlying racial divide, just as the indifference to the black population in flooded New Orleans tarnished the American reputation internationally.

“Attawapiskat is certainly not on the scale of Katrina. But Attawapiskat is the tip of the iceberg for the numerous Bantustan-style homelands of the far north. Years of chronic under-funding and bureaucratic indifference have created a Haiti north where dying in slow motion on ice-filled shantytowns is considered the norm” (www.huffingtonpost.ca/charlie-angus/attawapiskat-reserve_b_1126595.html#s487209).

Did you know . . .

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the U.S. Gulf Coast, hitting the city of New Orleans especially hard and devastating areas largely inhabited by the city's black population. The U.S. federal government's response—and the work of FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency—has been severely criticized as too little too late. Parts of New Orleans remain unreconstructed, and a large part of the evacuated black population has never returned to the city.

Did you know . . .

Attawapiskat First Nation is actually one of the few First Nations communities to post its financial statement online. They are available to any interested party at www.attawapiskat.org/financial-statements/.

The Ontario Government

When Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence declared a state of emergency in October, she first requested assistance from the federal (Conservative) government. In November she turned to the Ontario (Liberal) provincial government, requesting evacuation assistance. Ontario Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Kathleen Wynne, expressed her government's concern about the situation in Attawapiskat, but went on to say: "We cannot operate without the federal government. I am reaching out, I am willing to work with them, but the federal government has to be in the lead and they have to step up to the plate" (*Toronto Star*, November 25, 2011).

Wynne's response—and the ongoing lack of response from the federal government—motivated the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario to send a letter to both Premier McGuinty and Prime Minister Harper: "We are deeply ashamed that federal and provincial officials are pointing fingers at each other and refuse to take responsibility, particularly as children and elders of Attawapiskat face life-threatening conditions as winter approaches.

"We are profoundly concerned about the dangers of fire, freezing, infectious diseases, skin conditions, and mental health challenges that arise when people are forced to live in inhumane conditions."

The Federal Government

Federal Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Duncan was quoted more than once saying that his department was unaware of housing problems in Attawapiskat until after Chief Spence declared an emergency on October 28, 2011.

Once the government became aware of the problem, however, it responded. Duncan told the House of Commons: "We are deeply concerned about the situation. The community is facing a

number of challenges. We have had ongoing discussions with the chief and council in order to make progress on addressing these issues. My officials will be in the community early next week to discuss next steps. . . . Part of our overall next steps is to get to a place where proper local administration and governance can ensure there is progress being made in the community" (*The Globe and Mail*, November 26, 2011).

Duncan's concern with governance was echoed by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who noted that over \$90-million had been given to Attawapiskat since 2006, and the community still had major problems. "That is over \$50,000 for every man, woman, and child in the community. Obviously, we are not very happy that the results do not seem to have been achieved for that. We are concerned about that. We have officials looking into it and taking action."

The action taken, of course, was the appointment of a third-party manager to take temporary control of the band's finances—at least until the government is satisfied that its financial contribution is being appropriately used by the band.

The Band Council

As one might expect, the band council and other First Nations leaders were less than thrilled by this development. Chief Theresa Spence reacted (*Toronto Star*, December 1, 2011): "I'm very shocked. We were in the process of emergency planning. It tells me (federal officials) are not really helping us. They're penalizing us for helping our own people."

She was later quoted by *The Globe and Mail* (December 2, 2011): "It is incredible that the Harper government's decision is that instead of offering aid and assistance to Canada's first peoples, their solution is to blame the victim and that the community is guilty and deserving of their fate."

Follow-up

1. With a partner or in a small group compare the information you gathered in your charts. How did you classify the quotations from the various political figures discussed in this section?
2. How would you evaluate the federal government's response to the emergency at Attawapiskat?
3. Do you agree with NDP MP Charlie Angus's comparison of Attawapiskat with Hurricane Katrina? Why or why not?

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A Recurring Problem

Quote

"All across northern Canada are these isolated little . . . homelands, where people live on top of each other in mouldy shacks and where dying in slow motion is a way of life. The Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development was not aware of any of this." — MP Charlie Angus (*Toronto Star*, December 2, 2011)

For Your Information

A short CBC documentary on Pikangikum is available at www.cbc.ca/doczone/8thfire/2011/12/pikangikum.html.

A video on housing conditions in Wasagamack prepared by the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=JriVUBjkeck.

Focus for Reading

Using the chart below as an organizer, summarize the main problems the three First Nations communities discussed in this section have in common.

Community	Problems
Pikangikum	
Wasagamack	
Kashechewan	

For many Canadians, being unaware of the problems of isolated Northern First Nations communities is not unusual. But Attawapiskat may be the rule, rather than the exception. Here are three other examples of First Nations communities that have faced and continue to deal with difficult social and economic problems.

Pikangikum

Pikangikum First Nation is located 100 kilometres northwest of Red Lake, Ontario. Like Attawapiskat, it can be reached only by air or winter ice road. Pikangikum is often called the suicide capital of Canada. Over the last 10 years there have been more than 60 suicides in the community of about 2 400 people. Even more astounding, in 2001 there

were 35 suicide attempts. By 2009 there were 97. Most of the suicides came in clusters and involved young people. Nearly half of them were solvent abusers (there are over 100 addicted gasoline sniffers in Pikangikum). Such attempts are not declining; five youth committed suicide in one 44-day period in 2011. Community leaders and youth agree on one major cause: there is little or nothing for young people to do in Pikangikum.

The Ontario government ordered a special review of Pikangikum's suicide epidemic. It cited several of the problems that also face other First Nations communities: no running water, no sewage treatment, overcrowding, extreme poverty, and run-down housing in need of replacement. In 2007 the

Did you know . . .

Of the roughly 500 000 people who live on Canada's 3 117 reserves, thousands are still without indoor plumbing, and a quarter of them rely on water systems that pose potential risks to health, safety, and the environment. More than 120 First Nation communities were under a drinking-water advisory as of October 31, 2011 (www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2011/11/24/f-first-nations-infrastructure.html).

Did you know . . .

A recent CBC News story on First Nations infrastructure discussed many of the ongoing problems in Canada's First Nations communities (www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2011/11/24/f-first-nations-infrastructure.html). While it confirmed that plenty of money had been spent on the problems, it also showed that much remained to be done.

government of Canada promised \$46-million for infrastructure improvements. These would include a new school, linking the community to the provincial electrical grid, and new sewer and water treatment facilities. None of these commitments have been fulfilled (the construction of the new school is apparently not planned until 2017). The Ontario coroner's special report asked the federal government to live up to its commitments and responsibilities by building a new school, providing additional housing, building sewer and water treatment facilities, and creating a treatment centre in the community for substance abusers.

Wasagamack

Wasagamack is another northern community—located about 600 kilometres north of Winnipeg—accessible only by air and ice road. It is a community of about 1 800. The majority live in conditions identical to those in Attawapiskat: crowded into dilapidated homes without sewers and running water. Some homes, little more than shacks, have 18 or more people living in them. Few have enough beds, and many end up sleeping on the floor. Black mould, an extremely toxic substance, is a common problem.

Kashechewan

Another northern Ontario community, Kashechewan, is plagued by spring

flooding, which has from time to time resulted in evacuation of most of the community's residents. But other water problems have also plagued the community. In 2005 high *E. coli* levels were discovered in the town's drinking water, causing a rash of skin problems. This led to an emergency evacuation by the Ontario government of 60 per cent of the community's 1 900 members, at a cost of about \$16-million. The federal government had announced just one day previously that it would not carry out an evacuation.

Like Attawapiskat, Kashechewan has significant housing problems. Along with a third First Nations community, Fort Albany, Kashechewan declared a state of emergency in 2011 as did Attawapiskat. According to MP Charlie Angus, Fort Albany and Kashechewan decided to defer to Attawapiskat to make the case for all of them.

"They know you're not going to get a full-scale response across the board," Angus explained. "Even though in Kashechewan we have people in tents, and in Fort Albany we have major housing issues, Attawapiskat was seen as Ground Zero of the problem. The other communities said, 'Okay, let's focus on Attawapiskat'" (*The Globe and Mail*, December 10, 2011).

Follow-up

1. With a partner or in a small group compare the information in your summary charts. Help each other complete any missing information. Compare the problems identified in the three First Nations communities discussed in this section with those you have learned about Attawapiskat in this *CBC News in Review* video.
2. Attawapiskat's declaration of a state of emergency successfully drew public attention to the community's problems. What do you think will happen in Attawapiskat once the story fades from public attention? What effect is the current attention given to Attawapiskat likely to have on the similar problems in other First Nations communities?

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Activity: Addressing the Issue

“It is an issue of trust and respect. Only when this government realizes that it must work in a nation-to-nation relationship with aboriginal leaders will we start seeing real progress on the critical issues. Everything else flows from that.”
— Charlie Angus, MP (charlieangus.ndp.ca)

- Who has the responsibility to address the problems facing Canada’s First Nations?
- How can these problems be addressed?

Form small groups to brainstorm answers for both these questions.

1. What steps might Canada and the First Nations take to deal with some of the major problems we have seen that are common to many isolated northern communities, such as:
 - Poverty
 - Unemployment
 - Inadequate housing
 - Poor education
 - Alcohol and substance abuse
2. What responsibilities do federal political leaders—including those who are not members of the government—have to ensure that these problems are effectively addressed in a timely fashion?

When you have completed your brainstorming and arrived at consensus on your solutions, prepare a summary of your responses and present them to the rest of the class for further discussion.

After the discussion, you may wish to submit your ideas and solutions in the form of a short response paper.