

# The Ontario no G20 or G8 leader will see

## In northern First Nations communities, poverty, joblessness and despair are everywhere, yet these issues are left off summit agenda

Published On Sat Jun 12 2010

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SANDY LAKE, ONT. Precious Kakegamic couldn't be farther removed from the \$1.1 billion G8 and G20 summits and their global agenda.

The 11-year-old is ankle-deep in mud outside a tent erected to commemorate the anniversary of the signing of Treaty 5, which 100 years ago ceded 100,000 square km of land to the British Crown for a few tools, a life on a reserve and \$5 a head every year for "as long as the sun shone."

The event is being marked in this neglected world 600 km northwest of Thunder Bay, a part of Ontario no summit leader will see.

Unlike the sites hosting the summits, there are no shiny new buildings, no freshly paved roads and no fake lakes. Housing is scarce and marginal, heartbreaking poverty everywhere.

While prime ministers and presidents meet to try to improve the faltering economy and better the lives of mothers and babies in the underdeveloped world outside Canada, the deep needs of the North don't make the agenda. Ontario's First Nations chiefs weren't even invited.

"We have not been a party to any of the discussions leading up to the G8 or the G20," Ontario Regional Chief Angus Toulouse says. "Of course the national chief has made overtures to the Prime Minister's Office, to the federal government, to get a voice or to at least get an audience with the international leaders."

Toulouse is speaking outside a giant white tent soiled with mud stains. Inside it seems all 2,700 members of Sandy Lake First Nation gathered around long tables for a breakfast feast of cereal, juice and sausages while a parade of

speeches from community leaders and dignitaries took place on a small wood plank stage.

Sandy Lake residents worked for months to put on this show. Sandy Lake's children sang *O Canada* in Oji-Cree and about 20 community members of the Canadian Rangers stood solemnly on guard.

Few political leaders came. Ontario's Aboriginal Affairs Minister Chris Bentley attended, but his federal counterpart Minister of Indian Affairs Chuck Strahl did not.

The most special guest of this ceremony Treaty 5 itself was unable to make it on time. Normally housed in Ottawa's national archives, the treaty was supposed to arrive on its own plane accompanied by four red-coated Mounties, but bad weather prevented them from landing.

Remembering Treaty 5 is a bittersweet event.

The provincial First Nations chiefs who have gathered to mark the occasion will not call this a celebration. They say it is a time to reflect on decisions made in the past and figure out how to improve the lives of their people in the future.

Standing in full headdress on the stage, Sandy Lake Chief Adam Fiddler admits some would say they have nothing to celebrate and that there has been nothing but 100 years of broken promises. "But I have hope. I have hope for the future. I hope to renew that vision our forefathers had when they signed the treaty," he says.

Canada has gotten "very wealthy" as a result of many treaty arrangements made, agrees Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) Chief Stan Beardy. NAN is a political territorial organization representing 49 First Nation communities. "We are not happy," Beardy says from outside the tent. "The understanding reached 100 years ago is not being met."

The First Nations people were supposed to share the wealth and resources of the land with their European brothers, not be sidelined, says Beardy. The commemoration of Treaty 5 really serves as a reminder to Canada that this was a deal made by two nations under international law. "It is important that Canada is reminded that they have an obligation, an order of the Crown, to make sure our rights are respected," he says.

Yet he wonders why Canada has so far not signed the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People.

At Sandy Lake, a fly-in only community that has survived for centuries on hunting, trapping and fishing, there is little opportunity for the young.

Aboriginal teen suicide has become a plague in the North and it has touched Sandy Lake. It is estimated the suicide rate is five to six times higher for First Nations youth between the ages of 10 and 24 than for non-aboriginal youth.

Just a few weeks back, a young Sandy Lake woman took her life by hanging.

Of the 600 young people between the ages of 18 to 29 living here, Fiddler says only about 20 of them have jobs. "What hope is there?" he asks. "What opportunities are there at this point?"

Fiddler does not understand how this can be when Canada is consistently ranked one of the richest nations in the world for its quality of life.

"But look at the First Nations and you are looking at something like 63rd," he says. "We are living in one of the richest countries in the world, yet our people are among the poorest of the poor."

How to better the lives of the young has vexed First Nations leaders for years. The time is now to save one of Canada's fastest-growing populations, they say. The way to save First Nations youth is to start young, believes Toulouse.

He wonders why Prime Minister Stephen Harper has embarked upon a maternal child and health strategy in the Third World, yet he has neglected to look at this problem in his own country.

Statistics Canada data shows the infant mortality or death rate is 1.5 times higher than the Canadian rate.

"This is what frustrates the First Nation leadership in Canada," says Toulouse. "What we are saying is take a look inside Canada, too."

Toulouse appreciates Canada is stepping up to the plate internationally to help the underprivileged. "But you have to look inwards. We have a lot of First Nations communities like we have here in Sandy Lake that are remote, isolated, that are out of sight and out of mind," he says.

Need is right here in Harper's backyard, he says. For instance, there are 118 First Nations across Canada where the water is too polluted to drink. One in four aboriginal adults live in overcrowded homes and according to the Assembly of First Nations, 5,486 of 88,485 houses on-reserve do not have sewage.

Drive around Sandy Lake and you'll see many houses with plastic sheets or cardboard serving as windows. Some homes have no outer walls at all, just insulation.

The fact the federal government spent \$46 million in the Huntsville area to beautify an already rich part of the province for a summit that can be measured in hours is not lost on Toulouse.

“There is much need for renovations to the water system, to housing, you name it,” he says. “We have Third World conditions in many of our remote First Nations communities and it is not their fault.”

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath, who made the trek to Sandy Lake with NDP MPP Howard Hampton, called the G20 meeting in Toronto the “height of hypocrisy.” The global leaders might as well be living in a glass bubble, she says. “The G20 has no impact on their lives none whatsoever.”

The leaders are not going to talk about indigenous peoples in any countries, she adds. “And they are spending a billion dollars to do it to have a conversation that won’t affect the lives of real people. It is a disgrace.”