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Changes to land-claims process won't end Caledonia occupation: Six Nations

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TORONTO (CP) - Ottawa's proposal to revamp how land claims are handled isn't going to change anything in a southwestern Ontario town where an aboriginal occupation has lasted more than 15 months, Six Nations protesters said Tuesday.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's plan to set up an independent body that would evaluate land claims and help clear a growing backlog of cases didn't make much of an impression among protesters in Caledonia, Ont.

Janie Jamieson, who speaks for those who have occupied a former housing development in Caledonia since February 2006, said Harper should settle their land claim once and for all if he is serious about addressing aboriginal issues.

Although the federal government recently offered \$150 million to settle the outstanding land claim, Jamieson said there has been very little progress at the negotiating table.

"At any point, Stephen Harper could step in . . . but he doesn't," Jamieson said. The occupation will continue until the claim is recognized and settled, she added.

"Right here and now, it doesn't change one thing. It doesn't settle anything. It doesn't give me hope."

It certainly won't deter anyone from setting up road and railway blockades planned for June 29 - the "day of action" declared by aboriginal leaders frustrated with the slow pace of land claims, Jamieson said.

Over the course of the 15-month occupation, Six Nations protesters temporarily shut down a railway, blockaded the town's main thoroughfare and knocked out the community's hydro, she added.

"We're kind of up in the air as to what statement we can make on June 29."

A Six Nations chief involved in trying to end the Caledonia standoff shared Jameson's view that Ottawa's plan to revamp how native land claims are handled won't have any impact on the dispute.

Mohawk Chief Allen MacNaughton said Canada, Ontario and Six Nations have agreed to resolve the 16-month occupation of a former housing development through negotiations.

"It's not going to apply to us for one thing," MacNaughton told the Hamilton Spectator. "We already have a different process going."

MacNaughton said he believes the way the Caledonia dispute is being handled might be being used as a blueprint for the proposed legislation.

Others, however, took solace in Harper's announcement, hoping it will prevent similar conflicts from erupting in other communities in future.

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David Ramsay, Ontario's minister responsible for aboriginal affairs, said the federal government is finally "stepping up to the plate" and fixing a land claims process that was clearly fuelling frustration and protests.

"Ontario and the federal government are willing to reinvent the wheel," he said following Harper's announcement.

"The wheel was kind of flat and wasn't working very well. We need to re-tune it and get it repaired and that's (this) initiative."

Ontario is still mulling over the recommendations from the recent inquiry into the shooting death of aboriginal protester Dudley George in 1995, Ramsay said. The inquiry recommended Ontario establish its own treaty commission to facilitate land claims and appoint a full-fledged aboriginal affairs minister.

Ontario's treaty commission could very well be a part of this new, independent land claims body, Ramsay said.

Haldimand County Mayor Marie Trainer said she's still hopeful the proposed federal legislation will speed up talks aimed at ending the occupation. The people of Caledonia have lived a nightmare in the last 16 months, she said.

The occupation - which has turned violent at times - has driven a wedge into the community, she said. Hopefully this new land claims process can save another community from the same fate, Trainer said.

"I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy," she said. "It's a terrible situation."

Trainer said locals are fed up - particularly with Ontario provincial police, which they say have done little to end the occupation.

"People are so disheartened and upset with what has taken place and the perceived two rules of law," she said.

"Too many people have witnessed things and they want to know what our options are."

A council committee will meet next week to discuss whether or not to renew a contract with the provincial police, worth about \$7 million a year, which ends in September 2008.

Ontario has been urging Ottawa to set up an independent body to handle aboriginal land claims as it grapples with demonstrations in Caledonia and eastward in Deseronto where a rail blockade in April by a splinter group of Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte paralyzed passenger and freight traffic between Toronto and Montreal.

Aboriginal leaders, and the final report of the Ipperwash inquiry, have warned that more Caledonia-style protests will plague Canada until the federal government changes the way land claims are dealt with.

Under the current system, an aboriginal land claim can take well over a decade before it is settled.

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