



NATIONAL

CRISIS IN ATTAWAPISKAT



Toddlers huddling with their parents in sheds without running water or electricity. As many as 20 people crowded into **ramshackle** shelters meant for two or three. Buckets used as toilets. Homes infested with lice and scabies.

You might expect living conditions such as these in Somalia or Haiti – but in Canada?

ATTAWAPISKAT NIGHTMARE

It's hard to believe, but many people in the First Nations community of Attawapiskat have been enduring these conditions for years. And in late October, the housing crisis in this remote northern Ontario town became so desperate that Chief Theresa Spence declared a **state of emergency** – the third in three years.

The Chief said that in this community of 1800, 314 people are on a waiting list for housing. Many of the homeless, including two dozen families, are living in shacks, some without insulation or plumbing. Another 90 people are being housed in a large, abandoned construction trailer with just two toilets and four

working showers. Others are living in tents. With winter setting in and temperatures plunging to -20 Celsius and below, these people were at risk of dying from the cold, disease, or fires caused by unsafe heating, Ms. Spence stated.

“Even newborn babies are residing in . . . sheds and there's no water hookup or hydro hookup,” she reported.

A COMPLEX PROBLEM

What's behind the housing shortage in Attawapiskat? A population boom is part of the explanation. In this community, more than one-third of residents are under 19. Three-quarters are younger than 35. The number of people is growing too rapidly for the number of existing houses.

Location is another problem. New homes haven't been built to accommodate the expanding community in part because Attawapiskat is about 500 kilometres north of Timmins and accessible by ice road only a few months of the year. The rest of the time, supplies must be shipped in by airplane. That means

building materials are hard to get – and expensive, especially for residents who earned, on average, \$16,160 in 2006. Finding qualified builders is another problem.

DID YOU KNOW?

The aboriginal population of Canada is likely to reach 2.2 million by 2031, up from 1.3 million in 2006.

Making matters worse, many existing houses have become unlivable over the years. In some cases, mould – which often grows in cracks that form in homes built on **permafrost** – is to blame. In others, poor workmanship is at fault. Sometimes, a lack of repairs and maintenance is the problem.

“If your door knob falls off, you can't replace it, because there's no store. If your steps rot, you can't repair them, because you haven't got a hammer,” explained journalist Patricia Pearson, who is familiar with the problems of isolated communities.

Possibly the biggest factor in Attawapiskat's housing crisis, however,

DEFINITIONS

PERMAFROST: ground that stays permanently frozen
RAMSHACKLE: badly constructed or maintained

STATE OF EMERGENCY: an official declaration of disaster to marshal aid



was a massive sewage backup in 2009 that destroyed a number of homes. Suddenly, some 100 people had nowhere to live.

THE BLAME GAME

On October 27, Chief Spence called on the federal government to help resolve Attawapiskat's housing problems. She said her community simply can't afford to build the homes it needs at a cost of \$250,000 each.

"It's really a crisis we're facing in our community," she said. "It's time for the government to accept and understand what is going on, and deal with it."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, however, was reluctant to immediately come to the community's aid. He said Attawapiskat has received some \$90 million since 2006 and he wanted to know how that money had been spent before offering more funds.

To get to the bottom of the situation, on November 30, John Duncan, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), ordered an **audit** of Attawapiskat's finances. He also appointed a manager from outside the community to oversee spending.

ANGER AND FRUSTRATION

First Nations leaders and federal opposition parties were outraged by this response. They said that although \$90 million over five years sounds like a lot, under the Indian Act the money is intended to pay for all the services municipalities or provinces usually provide, such as education, water and sewage. Only \$4.3 million – or less than \$1 million per year – was actually earmarked for housing.

Critics also pointed out that Attawapiskat's funds have been co-managed by the community and a manager appointed by the government for the past ten years, so if there was any misuse of money, officials would have known about it long ago. Finally, they questioned the logic behind hiring an outside manager to oversee spending at a cost of \$1,300 per day – or \$180,000 over the course of his 7-month contract – instead of simply giving the community the money it needs to deal with its problems.

"Instead of offering aid and assistance to Canada's First Peoples, [the Harper government's] solution is to blame the victim, and [to suggest] that the community is guilty, and deserving of their fate," Chief Spence said in explaining why she refused to work with the government-appointed outside manager.

HELP ON THE HORIZON

The two sides remained at loggerheads for several weeks. Finally, on December 11, the federal government announced it would ship 22 modular homes to Attawapiskat as soon as conditions would allow. In the meantime, it would retrofit the community's healing lodge so it could be used as a temporary shelter. The government also promised to send in supplies to supplement Red Cross shipments of blankets, heaters and warm clothing that were delivered on November 29.

RESERVES IN TROUBLE

Chief Spence welcomed this help. But she, and other First Nations leaders, said a long-term solution was also needed – for all First Nations people. Many of the 3,000 **reserves** across

THE INDIAN ACT

The Indian Act of Canada was passed in 1876. The aim of this law was to integrate Indians in Canada into mainstream society.

The Indian Act gave the federal government almost complete control over how Indians lived. For example, it prevented them from logging the land around them, voting in Canadian elections, and leaving their reserves without permission. At the same time, it made the government responsible for the health, education, housing and lands of much of the Indian population.

Throughout the 20th century, the Indian Act was updated to reflect Canada's new awareness about human rights. Amendments in 1962 ensured that Indians could vote and other changes brought in during the 1980s and 1990s meant Indian communities could become more self-governing. While the government was still in charge of making sure Indians on reserves had housing, for instance, band councils could decide how to go about spending funds set aside for shelter.

In recent years, however, many leaders have been calling for the Indian Act to be abolished. They say the safeguards and benefits it provides do not make up for its shortcomings.

the nation face problems similar to those in Attawapiskat – and in a rich country like Canada, that's inexcusable.

"The situation is right across the country," said Shawn Atleo, chief of the **Assembly of First Nations**. ★

DEFINITIONS

ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS: the national organization which represents the First Nations of Canada

AUDIT: an official inspection of an organization's accounts
RESERVES: tracts of land set aside for First Nations use



NATIONAL CRISIS IN ATTAWAPISKAT

ON THE LINES

Answer the following in complete sentences:

1. Where is Attawapiskat located and how many people live in this community?

2. Why did Chief Theresa Spence declare a state of emergency in Attawapiskat in late October?

3. What factors have contributed to the housing shortage in Attawapiskat? Explain.

4. How did the federal government initially respond to Attawapiskat's request for help? Explain.

5. Why were First Nations leaders and federal opposition parties outraged by the government's response to the crisis? Explain.

6. What assistance had Attawapiskat received or been promised by mid-December? Explain.



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TRUE OR FALSE?

Mark each statement **T** (True) or **F** (False). If a statement is *false*, write the word or words that make it true on the lines below.

_____ 1. The Indian Act of Canada was passed more than a century ago.

_____ 2. When it was created, the Indian Act gave Indians almost complete control over their own lives.

_____ 3. Under the Indian Act, each First Nation community is responsible for its own health, education and housing.

_____ 4. Today, many First Nations leaders strongly support the Indian Act.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Making an inference: An inference is a conclusion drawn from evidence. *A plausible inference is supported by evidence in the article and is consistent with known facts outside of the article.*

What inferences can you draw from the fact that Attawapiskat has declared three states of emergency over the past three years?

JUST TALK ABOUT IT

1. As you see it, what is the significance of this story?

2. a) For what reasons is Attawapiskat's band council responsible for the community's housing crisis? For what reasons is the federal government responsible? What other individuals or groups can you suggest who might also share responsibility for the crisis?

b) If you were Prime Minister Stephen Harper, how would you handle the issue of inadequate housing in Attawapiskat? Explain.

ONLINE

Visit our student website at www.news4youth.com and click on the *What in the World?* tab to:

1. View a video taken by NDP Member of Parliament Charlie Angus, whose riding Attawapiskat is located in, of the [Attawapiskat housing crisis](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6abZoLFT5CQ) (or visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6abZoLFT5CQ>).

2. View [photos of Attawapiskat](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/photos/1505/#igImgId_24800) (or visit http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/photos/1505/#igImgId_24800). ★



GETTING INSIDE THE PICTURE

Directions:

1. Study the photograph below.
2. Then, complete each quadrant on the **Getting Inside the Picture** chart. Use as many details as you can.
3. Now, select one of your powerful words. Use this as a springboard for a 5-minute **Quick Write**. Let your pen flow. A good descriptive paragraph *has vivid details and helps the reader “get inside the picture” (experience the event as if he/she were right there)*.
4. Generate three possible titles for this picture. Then select the one that best captures the essence of the image. Explain why this is the most suitable title.



NDP Interim leader Nycole Turmel steps out of a shelter being used as temporary lodging in Attawapiskat on Tuesday November 29, 2011.

THE CANADIAN PRESS/Adrian Wylde



GETTING INSIDE THE PICTURE

Title: _____

<p style="text-align: center;">Senses</p> <p style="text-align: center;">What might you hear, smell, taste or touch? What colours, textures, sounds, movements do you experience?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Images</p> <p style="text-align: center;">What details in the photograph create vivid pictures in your mind?</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Words</p> <p style="text-align: center;">What powerful words describe the scene? What might you think, wonder, say if you were there?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Feelings</p> <p style="text-align: center;">What do you feel when you look at this image? What might the people in the photograph be feeling?</p>
<p>Quick write</p>	
<p>Possible titles:</p> <p>1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____</p>	
<p>The best title is # _____ because . . .</p>	



Complete this map assignment to better understand the article *Crisis in Attawapiskat*.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Obtain the required resources and read all the instructions before starting.
2. Colour your map after all labelling is completed.
3. Print in pencil only first, then go over the printing in black ink.
4. Work carefully and neatly.

Resources Required: pencil, black pen, pencil crayons, ruler, eraser and an atlas.

Part A Locate and label Ontario and the following U.S. states in CAPITAL letters and shade each as indicated:

Ontario (orange)	Minnesota (green)
Iowa (orange)	Wisconsin (red)
Michigan (yellow)	Pennsylvania (red)

Part B Locate and label the capital city of Ontario and the capital cities of the above U.S. states and underline each city name.

Part C Locate and label the following provinces and U.S. states in CAPITAL letters and shade each as indicated:

Manitoba (purple)	Quebec (pink)
Illinois (brown)	Indiana (pink)
Ohio (green)	New York (purple)

Part D Locate and label the capital city of Canada.

Part E Locate and label the community of Attawapiskat.

Part F Locate and label the following bodies of salt water and shade all ocean water dark blue:

Hudson Bay	James Bay
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Part G Locate and label the following lakes and shade them light blue:

Lake Superior	Lake Michigan
Lake Huron	Lake Erie
Lake Ontario	

Part H Locate and label the St. Lawrence River and shade it light blue.

Part I Shade all remaining territory grey.

Part J Complete your map with a frame, title and compass. ★



Ontario

0 100 200 300 400 500 Kilometres

