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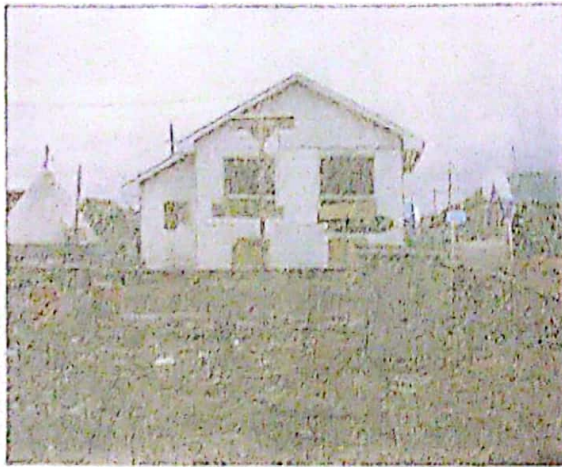
AUDIO

Track 3

A First Nations community in need

A state of emergency was declared in Attawapiskat in the winter of 2011–2012

by Nick Dasco



An example of poor housing in the northern community of Attawapiskat.

Attawapiskat is a small community of about 2,000 people in northern Ontario. Aboriginal people of the Cree Nation are the majority of the town's residents. The town had experienced a massive flood of sewage in July 2009 which destroyed the homes of ninety families and damaged the homes of many others. This mess had still not been clean-

AUTOR

Nick Dasco ist freier Journalist und lebt in Toronto.

POSSIBLE TASKS

- Before you read, look up the term 'state of emergency' in a dictionary. List all the possible things that a government can do when this is declared.
- Look at a map of Canada and find the town Attawapiskat. Which challenges might a small village like Attawapiskat face?
- Make a list with two columns with these headings: *Past problems* and *Current problems*.
- Discuss with a partner: Why do you think the Canadian government was criticized so much for taking over control of how the town's council spends its money?
- Why do you think the author is pessimistic about the situation of the town? Come up with your own ideas that could help the community of Attawapiskat.

ed up when the town's governing tribal council declared a state of emergency in October 2011 because they feared for the safety of residents with the coming winter. Temperatures average around -18°C in winter in Attawapiskat.

Government control

The Canadian government sent help, but also took over control of the community's finances from the council. The opposition parties in parliament accused the government of not properly monitoring native communities. This debate grew larger in the media with worries that the emergency supplies that had reached Attawapiskat were not being properly distributed. There was also criticism that the Canadian government had no right to take away the First Nations community's right to control the use of its finances.

A history of problems

Attawapiskat is located approximately 1,000 km northwest of Toronto, which is Canada's largest city. Although it is located less than 90 km from a highly profitable diamond mine run by De Beers, it has dealt with financial and other problems. In 1979, 136,383 litres of diesel leaked out from underground pipes and contaminated the local elementary school. This led to a series of long-term health problems in the students and staff of the school which was finally closed in 2000. Since then, all children in Attawapiskat who are not yet old enough for secondary school have been educated in portable trailers that serve as classrooms. The Canadian government has repeatedly promised to build a new school, but still has not done so.

Who's to blame?

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The damage caused by the flooding in 2009 and the lack of permanent replacement homes in the fall of 2011 necessitated a state of emergency. The federal government had already heavily subsidized Attawapiskat, which was supposed to monitor the use of funds. When the government took full control, they found that no formal budgeting had been done for years. Aboriginal groups accused the government of trying to oppress the aboriginal council in Attawapiskat because of their ethnicity. While an independent auditor eventually found no wrongdoing by the council of elders, and blamed the lack of housing simply on the difficulties of shipping everything to the remote community, the town is still in need of housing and a proper elementary school.

No solution in sight

Watching all the details unfold from Toronto, through my non-aboriginal eyes, the only thing that became clear was the lack of government capability in solving problems like this. The politicians blame each other and debate endlessly. The Canadian public also seems at a loss with the situation. While the government aid and support has helped to avoid a complete catastrophe in the town, the community is still at risk and there is no solution to its problems in sight.