

Mohawks and Others Block Trains in Ontario to Protest Land Use

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TORONTO, April 21 - Native Canadian protests spread across southern Ontario on Friday over a land dispute dating back to the Revolution, with Mohawks stopping at least a dozen freight trains and interrupting passenger train service between Montreal and Toronto.

There were no reported arrests or injuries.

CN Rail won a court injunction ordering the removal of demonstrators should protests continue. Via Rail, the national passenger line, announced it could no longer take weekend reservations on trains linking Toronto with Ottawa and Montreal, the nation's busiest routes, and was obliged to charter buses to honor existing reservations.

The demonstrations began at the end of February, when Mohawks of the Six Nations, a confederacy of Native groups, occupied a road outside Caledonia, an Ontario farming town, contending that a developer was building a housing project on Native land nearby.

The protests received little attention until the Ontario provincial police raided the group and arrested 16 people before dawn on Thursday. A scuffle left three officers injured, including one who was hit on the head by a bag of rocks and needed stitches. A few protesters said they had been hurt by police Taser guns.

The police action seemed only to feed the protests, as about 200 people returned to the site to build makeshift barricades, heap piles of gravel and burn tires and an abandoned van on the road.

Native protesters wearing camouflage pants and bandanas manned the barricades on the same road through Friday, but the police said they had no immediate plans to remove them again.

"We obviously prefer to have peaceful resolutions," said Prime Minister Stephen Harper. "But we gather there has been some attempt at that, and the situation is quite complex on the ground."

Leaders from the Six Nations reserve are meeting with officials from the federal and provincial governments to try to settle the matter.

The dispute, involving a 100-acre plot, has its roots in a 1784 agreement in which Britain granted a large strip of land in what is today southwestern Ontario to Natives in gratitude for their support against the American colonial rebels. The Six Nations surrendered the land in 1841, but Native activists filed a lawsuit in 1995 claiming that the agreement was made under duress, and that in any case the authorities had failed to meet their commitments.

Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, a professor of aboriginal studies at the University of

Toronto, said the Caledonia land dispute "could become a symbol of the broader dissatisfaction with how the government has dealt with land claims."

On Friday, Mohawks from the Tyendinaga reserve, near Belleville, set fires beside a CN Rail track and used two school buses to block traffic on a nearby road.

Natives of the Akwesasne reserve, near Cornwall, picketed a road near a busy American border crossing, and a group of Mohawks blocked the Mercier bridge near Montreal for nearly half an hour, interrupting commuter traffic.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/22/world/americas/22canada.html>