

Authorities ignored avalanche warnings

Government culpability in deaths of nine Quebec Inuit

Our reporter
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Last week's avalanche deaths in the remote Inuit (Eskimo) village of Kangiqsualujjuaq were a tragedy that was readily preventable. Only Quebec government and local school board officials failed to act on warnings that the village school was situated at the bottom of a mountainside where avalanches were probable and erect snow barriers.

Early on the morning of January 1, the school was struck by an avalanche, killing nine and injuring 25. When the avalanche hit, some 400 of Kangisualujjuaq's 650 residents were in the school gymnasium, celebrating the arrival of the New Year. Six other buildings, including the village church and the only food store, were struck by the avalanche and have been shut down.

In 1994 an avalanche, which injured two persons, stopped just short of the school. The Kativik School Board then ordered a study by avalanche specialists that found that avalanches were likely to be a recurring problem. The report recommended the construction of snow fences and racks near the top of the mountain to prevent accumulations of snow and urged that the yard in the school's rear be declared off-limits in the winter.

In the wake of the tragedy, school board and Quebec Education Ministry officials have blamed each other for the failure to implement the report's recommendations. Provincial officials claim that the report was never forwarded to the ministry and, that in any case, erecting the snow barriers was the school board's responsibility. "When a school board gets a report like this, it's up to them to follow it up," declared an aide to Parti Québécois Education Minister François Legault.

School board officials, meanwhile, insist the specialists' report was forwarded to the ministry and note that the board cannot make any capital expenditures without ministry approval.

Irrespective of whether the report was forwarded to the ministry or not, government officials should have known of the avalanche danger. Ministry officials admit to having received a letter from the avalanche specialists that outlined their initial findings, including that there was likely to be a recurring threat of avalanches near the Kangiqsualujjuaq school.

The Inuit of northern Quebec, like other aboriginal peoples in Canada, have long suffered government neglect, indifference and abuse. Canada's native people have poverty, incarceration, suicide, death and infant mortality rates far above the Canadian norm. Indeed, a recent United Nation's report said the conditions prevailing in Canada's native communities are considerably worse than those in many so-called underdeveloped or Third World countries.

In the 1950s, several dozen Inuit were taken from their homes in northern Quebec and resettled on a remote island well north of the Arctic Circle to boost Canadian claims to sovereignty. They were allowed to return to their homes only after many had starved to death.

Kangiqsualujjuaq, which is situated on Ungava Bay, is inaccessible by road and does not even have an ambulance. Many believe that several of the nine who perished in the avalanche would have survived had they been transported by ambulance. Instead, under conditions of bitter cold, they were ferried to the local clinic by snowmobile and flatbed truck.

At present, the 14 Inuit communities that make up the Nunavik region of northern Quebec are facing dire social problems, including an outbreak of tuberculosis, due to an acute housing shortage. Because of the lack of housing, families have been forced to double up, leading to situations where 15 and even 18 people have been living in three bedroom houses. To alleviate the

housing crisis in the region, which has a population of some 5,000, would require, according to Inuit leaders, the building of 425 new houses. Yet for the past three years governments have built a not single new home in the Nunavik. Again the Inuit are victims of a jurisdictional dispute, with the federal and provincial governments bickering over who has responsibility for providing funding for social housing to the Inuit.

In an attempt to cover for years of indifference and to obscure government culpability in the avalanche deaths, leading government officials including Prime Minister Jean Chretien, Indian Affairs Minister Jane Stewart, Deputy Quebec Premier Bernard Landry and Quebec Liberal Party leader Jean Charest have traveled to Nunavik to bring condolences to the Inuit. But they have another motivation in making a display of their concern. Chretien and his Liberal government have repeatedly said that in the event of Quebec's secession, Quebec's borders would be open to question and should the native people chose to exercise their "right to self-determination" by remaining in Canada, Ottawa would be legally and morally bound to consider their request.



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