

# Water supply disruptions continue in Iqaluit, a major city in Canada's far-north and Nunavut's capital

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Iqaluit, the capital of Canada's vast far northern territory of Nunavut, lifted a city-wide boil water advisory March 4 that had been in place since the beginning of the month.

In an earlier news release, authorities stated, "The City recommends that all water used for consumption and dental hygiene is brought to a rolling boil for a minimum of one full minute."

Simon Doiron, Iqaluit's director of public works, called the advisory "precautionary." It was triggered by maintenance work to bypass a leaking ball valve, which caused the water system to depressurize. Under regulations from the territory's public health body, a drop of pressure in the water main below 20 psi triggers a boil water advisory and water-quality testing requirements. The leaking ball valve remains a problem and will have to be repaired in the summer once temperatures have risen sufficiently.

The boil water advisory is just the latest in a series of problems Iqaluit's close to 8,000 residents have experienced with their water infrastructure in the last six months. In October 2021, a state of emergency was declared that ultimately lasted two months, when petroleum fuel was discovered in the water supply. Residents had complained about a fuel smell coming from their taps. An old underground fuel tank from 1962 that was buried next to the water treatment plant was thought to be the source of the contamination. The city removed the tank and installed a device to monitor for hydrocarbons. However, the time required for the repairs and the subsequent flushing, testing and engineering confirmation needed to ensure the risk of repeat contamination had been eliminated was prolonged by staff shortages at both the municipal and

territorial level.

Throughout the state of emergency, the city handed out bottled water at different sites around Iqaluit. Ten days into the emergency, the Canadian Armed Forces was brought in to assist by collecting and purifying water from a nearby river using a reverse osmosis system.

Just a month after the state of emergency was lifted, the city was on a boil water advisory again for ten days, while further clean-up measures were taken to eliminate residual traces of fuel from the October incident that had re-entered the water distribution system.

The series of disruptions to the water supply, occurring during the fall and winter when temperatures in Iqaluit are well below freezing, caused serious inconvenience and posed a major health hazard to the city's residents. At the Qikiqtani General Hospital, the city's only hospital and the territory's largest, workers were unable to properly wash their hands or sterilize equipment during the state of emergency. This not only made many medical procedures impossible to perform, but also significantly increased the likelihood of the spread of COVID-19.

Some patients had to be medevaced out of the territory to other hospitals. Iqaluit Deputy Mayor Janet Pitsiulaaq Brewster revealed that her own mother had been transported to a hospital in Ottawa, two thousand kilometers away, to receive a diagnostic procedure that is normally available in the city. And, as the hospital is the only facility in the city that can give general anesthesia, the waiting list for children needing dental surgery doubled from 500 to 1,000. In 2019, the Health Department in Iqaluit forecast 2,400 medevacs for

2020. At a cost of upwards of \$40,000 for each medevac, the financial burden is enormous and currently requires an annual budget of about \$100 million.

According to the government of Nunavut, the number of medical evacuations for the territory is growing at a rate of eight percent a year. With 35 beds, the Qikiqtani General Hospital is far and away the territory's best equipped. Like hospitals across Canada, it is under constant financial pressure.

Canada's largest province or territory by area, Nunavut has some 40,000 residents, more than 80 percent of whom are Inuit. During most of 2020, the territory was able to avoid COVID-19 infections, due both to its remote location and the deployment of strict travel controls and social distancing. By December 2020, however, the territory experienced a major outbreak after the country entered a disastrous second wave due to the profits-before-life back-to-work/back-to-school policy of the capitalist ruling elite.

On top of the water supply disruptions and the threat of COVID-19, Nunavut continues to confront chronic tuberculosis outbreaks. Tuberculosis rates have been extremely high in Nunavut for decades, with the infection rate more than 66 times greater than the rate seen in the general Canadian population. A severe shortage of proper housing and high food prices are major contributing factors to Nunavut's ongoing tuberculosis epidemic.

When it came to power in 2015, the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government pledged to support a program to eliminate tuberculosis in Nunavut by 2030. However, it refused to provide adequate funding. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, authorities were forced to acknowledge that the tuberculosis elimination program had effectively been abandoned.

Despite the best efforts of repair crews, hospital staff, residents and those who worked to distribute clean water during the state of emergency last fall, the water supply crisis remains unresolved. The deputy mayor stated, "We've known for years that we are in a water crisis and that we need a new source of water, although the contamination is not in our water source, it's in our system... What we know with climate change our system has slowly been breaking down over a number of years. We need \$130 million in order to fix the entire system and to find a new and larger source of water

that's nearby."

No level of government has indicated who will pay for this work. Every time a piece of infrastructure fails due to obsolescence, capitalist politicians rob resources from other essential services, which are all run on austerity budgets at the best of times.

But Nunavut is far from being a desolate and impoverished land. It has a GDP of \$3 billion, massive reserves of iron ore, and significant diamond, gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc and uranium mines. In the age of climate change, it must also be remembered that much of the economically and strategically significant North West Passage runs through Nunavut. There is no legitimate reason why, with all of this wealth and a small, albeit scattered, population, securing reliable clean drinking water should be a problem.

The reality is that Canada's financial oligarchy and its political representatives are concerned only with exploiting Nunavut's abundant natural resources, while its overwhelmingly indigenous population is left to face squalid living conditions. The refusal to guarantee clean water, the most basic necessity of life, in one of the most advanced countries in the world clearly demonstrates the priorities of the Canadian ruling class, and why their capitalist social order must be abolished.



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