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Aboriginal Militancy: Projections for 1999 and Beyond

Unrest and militant action in and around aboriginal communities has become taken for granted over the last several years. Blockades are treated as if they had some measure of social legitimacy; a normal action in pursuing outstanding grievances. The response from governments and law enforcement agencies, where there is violence or the threat of violence, has been one of negotiation and financial reward. While this strategy has its benefits it also creates longer term problems.

The origins of the governments' and law enforcement's response to this type of situation is clearly the 1990 Oka Crisis in Quebec. Although eight years have passed, the legacy of that 78 day stand-off remains ingrained in the national psyche. One dead police officer, approximately \$200 million in costs related to the crisis and social unrest in affected communities represent a scenario that no one in government or law enforcement wants to repeat.

In an effort to avoid a repeat of an Oka-type conflict, governments have negotiated with militants while at the same time claiming not to be giving in to blackmail and terrorism. Even when faced with overtly illegal activity, law enforcement agencies have been hesitant in enforcing the law and in many cases have told complainants to get a court injunction as if the situation was a civil dispute. This incurs additional costs to the complainant, delays the opening of contested areas to legitimate activity. So too, court injunctions are often ignored by militants.

It is no coincidence that militants engaged in illegal activities, such as barricades on public roads, will display flags of the Mohawk Warrior Society (MWS) and the American Indian Movement (AIM). Although these flags can be bought by anyone their sighting generates alarm in the media, public, governments and law enforcement.

Recent actions such as the blockade at Listuguj (1998) reinforced the notion that violence, or the threat of violence, works. The Listuguj militants propelled their issue up to the top of the list by initiating the blockade. They then obtained more concessions from the Quebec provincial government after that government publicly stated that it would only deal with the elected band council.

The success of the Listuguj militants was not lost on the aboriginal community of La Romaine on Quebec's lower North Shore. Within days of the end of the Listuguj blockade, the chief and members of La Romaine threatened to block the only road to the region over fishing rights. In a very short period of time the Quebec provincial government had sat down and made a deal with La Romaine. Afterwards, the chief of La Romaine, Georges Bacon, was quoted in the media as saying "I think it pays to do roadblocks".

The summer of 1998 has seen the highest number of warning indicators and incidents of unrest since 1995. There have been no fewer than 20 indicators of unrest. There have been nine incidents at the time this bulletin was written. The number and intensity of militant action should taper off around October and then pick up again in April of 1999 as indicated in previous reports. This is primarily a function of weather.

It is highly probable that aboriginal militant activity will increase during the Spring of 1999. A number of factors will most likely play a role in causing this increase. The relative success of militant actions in 1998, court decisions, internal community conflicts and unresolved grievances will most probably combine and result in volatile situations. There is a high probability that these situations will involve violence or the threat of violence. The threat is particularly high in the case of internal conflict. There has been an increase in this type of conflict lately. Often this type of conflict pits the elected band council against traditionalists. The term traditionalist, in some cases, has become a convenient title for those not in power.

Governments and the public have usually called for the use of the Canadian Forces when it appears that militants are heavily armed and beyond the capabilities of law enforcement to handle. The armoured vehicles and the firepower of the Canadian Forces is believed to be adequate to handle these situations, however, this option may not be the most effective solution.

Almost a month passed before the Canadian Forces were on the ground during the 1990 Oka Crisis. There were delays in getting vehicles loaned to the RCMP during the 1995 Gustafsen Lake Stand-off.

It is confirmed that many of the militants that Canadian law enforcement agencies have confronted in the past have been armed with a variety of weapons. These weapons can easily neutralize all of the normal police defensive equipment such as body armour and even light armoured vehicles. The weapons include assault rifles in the 5.56mm and 7.62mm categories. Several .50 calibre rifles have been seized in police operations since 1990. It is highly probable that more of these weapons are available for use by militants in future conflicts. Explosive devices such as gasoline bombs, grenades and construction grade explosives are known to be stocked by aboriginal militants. It is also possible that they possess light anti-tank weapons such as the M-72, [redacted] and medium and heavy machineguns in the 7.62mm and .50 calibre range.

Law enforcement tactics have evolved over the years to adapt to the tactics used by criminal elements. Many police forces in North America now use armoured vehicles to protect their officers from high calibre weapons and explosives in the course of their duties. The RCMP is in the process of acquiring vehicles that would provide protection to its members from the previously mentioned weapons. The probability for the need for this equipment in police operations has increased with the relative success of militant tactics during 1998. British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec are the three provinces where militant activities of this severity are most likely to take place.

**NOTE:** Document obtained from the RCMP by Garry Breitkreuz, MP as a result of an *Access to Information Act* request and subsequent complaint to the Information Commissioner of Canada  
 - RCMP File 02ATIP-14365 – Reply dated October 4, 2002.