

AIM fights cultural genocide

by Joan Shields, CUP

OTTAWA (CUP) - "I had to decide six years ago, when I joined the Movement, if I was ready to die for my people. It may be hard for you to understand but I feel so strongly about the survival of my culture that I am prepared to die."

These words are usually associated with freedom fighters in Argentina or the jungles of Africa, but strangely enough they came from a man sitting in an office in sleepy downtown Ottawa. Not so strange is the fact that the man is Alex Akiwenzie, National Co-ordinator of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in Canada for the past two years.

AIM is a radical grass-roots organization fighting to preserve the rights and culture of natives in Canada. Akiwenzie says it's impossible to estimate AIM's membership, but he knows there's strong support for the movement in most Indian communities.

AIM has been synonymous with militancy and reservation occupations and in the press, but Akiwenzie says the stories are usually one-sided. When roadblocks are spontaneously set up on a prairie highway by Indians fed up with police harassment and a confrontation with the provincial police ensues, AIM will likely be called in to give advice or send reinforcements. AIM's role isn't to instigate violence; instead it functions like a watchdog to ensure that Indians have a fighting chance when confrontations occur.

Given the present status of Indians, AIM doesn't shy away from violence either.

"When a logging company puts a road through a reservation and destroys the land we live on, that's violence. We're only responding to the treatment we get," says Akiwenzie.

"Whites only respect two things: money and violence. Indians don't have money, but we sure have the threat of violence. Violence has its place; we respect it and don't abuse it. It's the only thing we have going for us," he says.

These kinds of statements have led the Defense department to list "red power" as one of the most serious threats to national security. According to Akiwenzie there is "quite a bit of RCMP infiltration in AIM" and AIM leaders fear for their personal safety.

"I'm not paranoid, I got over that in my first year in the movement. I take a few precautions so that accidents won't happen though. Even if it's 4 in the morning and I'm about to cross a street, I'll wait for the green light."

AIM takes a different stance from other native organizations by refusing to take money or orders from the government.

"You can't bite the hand that feeds you," says Akiwenzie. He says the money that's poured into government - sponsored native groups does more harm than good.

"You can't trust the government. My people have a history of signing a treaty and shaking hands with the government and as soon as we turn around we get stabbed in the back," he says.

Akiwenzie is leary of any deals with the department of Indian affairs and complains about their patronizing attitudes and red tape.

"When some flunkie phones me and says 'the minister says' I just tell them that the minister can phone me himself and not have someone else telling me what he wants." As a result Akiwenzie says, "the department of Indian affairs hates AIM's guts."

Akiwenzie is bitter about the



Life ain't easy for
a boy named Sioux.

natives who come to Ottawa and work as small bureaucrats for Indian affairs.

"When they first come they're full of good intentions, but soon they don't want to jeopardize their \$20,000 salaries and their cocktails receptions. They forget what brought them to Ottawa in the first place -- the poverty of their family and community back home."

Working for the past few months in Ottawa himself Akiwenzie says you can't sell out if you're going to be an affective leader in the Indian movement.

"I scrape by on very little money, I don't drink, smoke or go to parties. As a representative of AIM, there are a lot of people just waiting for me to make a wrong move to discredit the organization."

A confusing point, AIM Canada is completely separate from AIM in the U.S. One of the most visible differences is that the American movement has a lot more money.

When you ask for a donation here, you're lucky if you get \$2," says Akiwenzie. As a result, AIM Canada can't afford an office or any other basic necessities, and some of Akiwenzie's time is spent fundraising.

Another difference he sees between Canada and the U.S. is the subtlety of Canadian racism.

"People think that Canada is a

very free and open country and that racial discrimination doesn't occur here like in the States. In Canada people don't come right out and say they don't like you -- you find out later. At least in the States you know where you stand."

American Indians are also known for looking more militant. "I have long black braids, wear animal teeth around my neck and carry a cane -- sometimes I'm mistaken for an American Indian," he says.

"One of the big differences between native and European cultures is seen in the evolution of our language. In Indian there are no words meaning 'I' and 'mine'. Indians have a collective culture and express themselves in terms of 'our'."

By studying history, Akiwenzie finds insight into radicalizing the essentially peaceful Indians today. "When the Europeans first came over they slaughtered the Indians. They had the guns and an organized military power -- Indians wouldn't think of wiping anyone out. It's the Europeans who were the savages. Even now with all the poverty and discrimination, Indians are only interested in what goes on in their reservation. They'll only take action if someone is about to knock their door down and kill them."

Akiwenzie says he became interested in militancy through personal

experience rather than reading books by revolutionaries like Mao and Che Guevara. He says it's odd that white students can become involved with struggles taking place in the Third World and not focus on what's happening to the native people in their own country.

"Africa and Asia are thousands of miles from here -- it's important to solve what's happening in Canada," he says.

Akiwenzie says it's up to white students to take a position on the native question and lobby to have some laws changed if they don't want to see the annihilation of the Indian people in their lifetime.

"The destruction of the Indian culture happened generations ago, but students can't blame it on someone else forever. They can become aware of the reasons why it happened. Even if a student gave a small contribution every month to a native group, a lot more could get done."

Akiwenzie used to speak at universities but gave up when he realized "no one was really listening to what I was saying."

Akiwenzie quickly sums up his reasons for working with AIM. "As an Indian, I would rather be killed than sell out. Whites have already sold out -- they don't know what's happened to them. I don't want to see that continue."