

STRANGERS IN THE LAND ... AGAIN

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN AN EXTRA-ordinary sight in most Canadian towns, yet one that is increasingly familiar to northerners: one day last winter the skies above Iqaluit, NWT began to fill with the swollen profiles of C-130 Hercules, signalling an invasion code-named Operation Lightning Strike. Sweeping down, the planes deposited hundreds of troops and the various paraphernalia they needed to "secure" the town on the premise that foreign saboteurs had attacked power and communication facilities. For weeks, Iqaluit was filled with rumbling armoured vehicles, marching soldiers and the booming of gunfire bouncing off the surrounding hills. "It brought to life what we see on TV," said a town official, "I think that shocked people a little." Nevertheless, none of the 3,200 townsfolk complained about the inconvenience or the graphic, if benign, demonstration of the growing militarization of Canada's north. Nor did they when Iqaluit learned it will be one of the five "forward" operating locations for CF-18 fighters. What makes this strange is that Iqaluit is also a town where many people say they oppose Arctic militarization and where the council has expressed this recently by unanimously passing a resolution declaring the town "nuclear free" and supporting a proposal to make the Arctic a nuclear weapon-free zone.

Seemingly paradoxical, these reactions are actually typical of the ambivalence one finds talking to people who live in the north, particularly the Inuit, about military developments there. As the Arctic has become the new growth area for the superpower nuclear confrontation – and Canada's role in it has thus increased – native



On visiting the North, a southern reporter finds Canadian Inuit are of two minds about the increasing attention paid to their homeland by the Armed Forces.

BY KEVIN McMAHON

political groups have increased their calls for the demilitarization of the region. Yet it is not likely that these are much troubling either the federal government or the Armed Forces. Both know that many ordinary Inuit actually welcome military developments, despite a culture and a variety of grievances with the military which would lead an outsider to think just the opposite.

OF ALL HUMAN SOCIETIES, THE Inuit are amongst the least culturally disposed to accepting military rationale. Aside from the occasional skirmish with Indians, their remote homeland has blessed them with a history free of war, an absence of enemies and a deep belief in sharing and harmonious relations as basic survival skills.

In recent years, much of the work of Inuit politicians has been trying to translate those values into

multilateral agreements among the nations that now dominate their land. "We see ourselves as a people who are trying to bring people together instead of fighting each other," says John Amagoalik, who has worked with the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, representing Canadian Inuit, and the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC), made up of natives from Alaska, Greenland and Canada. Since forming in 1977, the ICC has continually called for the demilitarization of the Arctic. In 1986, it launched a study of the social and environmental impacts of military activity and an examination of the viability an Arctic nuclear weapon-free zone. ICC lawyer Paul Joffe says the organization quickly realized that the Soviet dependence on its Arctic submarine bases makes a nuclear weapon-free zone unlikely. But it continues to work on more limited proposals, with the intention of drafting an actual

treaty text to propose to the circumpolar states.

The ICC's motivation is not, of course, wholly philosophic. Traditionally nomadic, the Inuit resent borders to begin with and none more so than the superpowers' nuclear wall dissecting the Arctic. In the face of a southern onslaught they see circumpolar co-operation as their prime hope for cultural survival. But the Cold War makes this a slow business. The Soviet Union has consistently refused to allow Siberian Inuit to even attend ICC meetings. Only very recently, says Amagoalik, has the organizations' persistence "started to open doors" on the other side.

More immediately, the Inuit worry over the environmental damage of military developments. No other government agency has undertaken such huge engineering projects in the north as has the military and none has littered the tundra with so much dangerous garbage. In 1963, when half the original sixty-one Distant Early Warning Line sites became technologically redundant, they were simply abandoned to pillage and rust. For more than twenty years electrical transformers drip-fed the land with toxic PCBs. The federal government finally ordered the chemicals cleaned up in 1985 to forestall local concerns over the North Warning System agreement. But the Inuit are not so easily appeased and many believe further militarization of the Arctic means its further pollution. Explaining his fear of nuclear weapons accidents, one hunter told me he believed southerners don't comprehend the fragility of the northern environment. "Your trees and gardens would be affected [by radiation]... but it wouldn't last that long. We are so far up here in the north, the wildlife is very delicate."