

I will now to turn to the dispute at Oka, in the province of Quebec involving the Mohawks of Kanesatake. The issue concerns land on which urban development was planned by the Town of Oka -- land which the Mohawks consider belongs to them.

The Oka situation is unique among native claims for land in Canada. There is no formal Indian reserve land in Oka at present. Rather, there is a series of blocks of federally-owned land set aside for the use and benefit of the Kanesatake Mohawks. These blocks, which were acquired by the federal government in 1945, are the remnants of a once-vast seigneurie granted by the King of France to the Sulpician religious order in 1717 for the purpose of establishing a Mission there. The religious order came to establish a settlement on the lands and brought with them Nipissing, Algonquin and Iroquois (Mohawk) Indians from Montreal. The ownership of the land has been disputed by the Mohawks since the 1700's.

Nonetheless, the Government of Canada has attempted to find a way to address the concerns of the 1,539 member Mohawk community and the 750 residents of Oka. Community planning studies, financed by Canada, were undertaken by the Mohawks of Kanesatake in 1988/89. Since August 1989, a federally appointed mediator has worked with the parties on this issue under an agreed mandate. A framework agreement was reached in September 1989, establishing a ratification date for both sides of March 1, 1990.

In January, 1990, however, the Chief of Kanesatake was replaced by the community, in accordance with its traditional procedures. On March 6, the new Chief and Council requested an indefinite suspension of the negotiations. The municipality of Oka then lifted its moratorium on development of the land. This was followed immediately on March 10, 1990, by the Mohawks erecting a barricade on a public road. In June, the federal Minister of Indian Affairs met separately with representatives of Oka, Kanesatake and the Quebec Native Affairs Minister, in an effort to bring the parties together and find common ground.

However, the municipality of Oka obtained an injunction from the Quebec Superior Court ordering the Mohawks to remove the barricade. The Mohawks refused to comply with the Court order. On July 10, the Oka Council requested the Sûreté du Québec (the Quebec Police Force) to enforce the injunction. A police officer was shot and killed at the barricade, which was manned by heavily armed members of the Mohawk Warrior Society, using weapons that are illegal in Canada. In support of Kanesatake, the Mohawks of Kahnawake set up a barricade blocking a bridge on a major highway connecting two parts of metropolitan Montreal. Media reports indicate that there is some disagreement among various members of Mohawk community about the tactics being employed by the Warriors.