

Canada: Grim fate for thousands of Indigenous still stranded from 2011 Manitoba flood

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Flood evacuees feel lost in city's 'wicked world'

In two years since arriving in Winnipeg, 17 residents of Lake St. Martin reserve have taken their own lives

"The first casualty we had was my niece (Alexis). That was really hard. She told me once, 'Uncle, I want to go home. I don't want to stay out here.' " CHIEF ADRIAN SINCLAIR LAKE ST. MARTIN

WINNIPEG-Diane Sinclair often has the same nightmare. In her home at Lake St. Martin First Nation reserve, there is water everywhere. It flows through the cracks of her family's trailer and washes out the old dirt roads and hunting trails around it. The water winds through a graveyard where she buried her 20-year-old daughter, Alexis, in the prettiest white dress she could find.

There is always Alexis, her shy, second oldest, pulling her long, glossy black hair out of the way as she gets ready to tie the noose that will go around her neck.

When Sinclair wakes in the morning there is no relief. Instead, she realizes she is living her nightmare and her daughter has taken her own life because she couldn't stand the stress of the big city.

In Winnipeg, 300 kilometres from everything they have ever known, the people of Lake St. Martin in southern Manitoba have been made to feel like burdens. Sinclair is one of more than 1,400 people who were evacuated to Winnipeg from the reserve in the spring of 2011, when the provincial government decided to divert through their land flood waters that were headed for the capital.

The flood swallowed the land she grew up on, the land her ancestors lived on for decades. Nearly two years later, she and hundreds of other members of the reserve are stuck in limbo, caught in a dispute between the band council and provincial government as to where the reserve will be resurrected.

Chief Adrian Sinclair, who is Diane Sinclair's brother, says they saved the city of Winnipeg by allowing their community to be destroyed. Now his people tell him they are called "freeloaders" and their elders have been physically assaulted and yelled at.

"And the suicides," he continues, shaking his head. He swipes at his eyes with his large hands, embarrassed to be crying. "The first casualty we had was my niece (Alexis). That was really hard. She told me once, she said, 'Uncle, I want to go home. I don't want to stay out here.'"

Alexis, who had a baby daughter, hanged herself in the garage of the house her mother rented in the wake of the 2011 flood. Her family buried her in a white dress because she had dreamed of getting married. She was laid to rest in a coffin with a fibreglass casing, so that the water that caused her community so much pain could never touch her again.

Her daughter, Danielle, is being raised by Diane. "That hurt, putting your niece away, as a leader. That really tore me up inside."

Since then, Chief Sinclair says 16 other evacuees from Lake St. Martin have committed suicide — and he fears that number will continue to grow.

Sinclair is tired of fighting, but his people say they don't want him to settle for the land the government bought. He will battle on for a site the band council has found and hope the residents of Lake St. Martin will stay strong in the meantime. "This is a wicked world, the city. It's no place for my people," he says. "I want to bring my people home."

BUT WHERE will home be? Sinclair says he agreed to a temporary housing solution as long as there were concrete, long-term plans to build the reserve in the location the council agreed on. The province spent millions of dollars on 65 homes on a former Canadian Forces radar base near Gypsumville — about 240 kilometres northwest of Winnipeg — after receiving 157 written applications from Lake St. Martin residents saying they were interested in a home, according to the provincial government.

Manitoba was negotiating with Sinclair when he walked away from the deal in late 2011, saying the government ignored the plans he wanted for the temporary homes. He says he and his community wanted to build interim homes with the help of a private company and was told that would happen.

Sinclair says the government then gave the building contract to someone else without his consent, leaving him and his people with little input into how to build their community. Ultimately, only 13 families/households chose to live at the radar base site, Sinclair says.

The reason people were no longer interested living there, he says, was because snakes were being found in the homes. The Manitoba government acknowledged the site was known for annual garter snake migrations, and put snake fencing around the site at the First Nation's request. Sinclair says the fence has not been effective, and that families living at the site have found snakes in their homes. The province denies these claims.

Sitting at his desk at the band council office in Winnipeg, Sinclair looks overwhelmed. He wants to do right by his people but he doesn't want them to be stuck. He fears that by accepting the temporary home deal they might be stuck there forever. "If they can break one promise, why can't they break bigger ones that will keep us there permanently?" he asks.

Sinclair, elected two years ago, desperately wants to be a good leader for his people but his time as chief so far has been filled with difficulties related to the flooding and evacuation. "There are times I just want to go away. I don't want to give up, either. I don't want to be labelled that I gave up. I'm fighting for the future of my grandchildren, their grandchildren."

Now, he says his dreams for his grandchildren and future generations to grow up on a reserve without flooding may be dashed, because the provincial government bought land adjacent to the old

Lake St. Martin reserve without telling him.

Plans to choose a new reserve went into action about a month after the first evacuation in May 2011, Sinclair said. He and council began touring various sites in the province that could be used for their new reserve. Sinclair says he looked carefully at all the land presented to him and made it clear that the eight or so parcels of land they toured could be options.

One location — Site 9 — was ideal because it was near a major highway that would make travel to Winnipeg and Thompson easy. Most importantly, he adds, they would never have to worry about flooding again — Site 9's elevation is more than 30 metres higher than their previous reserve.

Sinclair says he was horrified to learn in December 2011 that the provincial government had bought a parcel of land that month for \$1.5 million without the reserve's consent, violating a constitutional right that says aboriginal people must be consulted on decisions affecting them.

The province says the Lake St. Martin First Nation endorsed the decision. "The landowners were anxious to sell and had a prospective buyer, so the province moved quickly to ensure the property would be available for the First Nation," said Jean-Marc Prevost, a spokesman for the provincial government. "It remains an option for the First Nation and the federal government to consider."

Sinclair disagrees, saying the purchased land was simply one option of many presented and that the province knew all along Site 9 was the one they wanted. The provincial government denies Sinclair's assertion.

Sinclair says the longer he plans to fight for Site 9, the longer his people will be stranded in limbo in Winnipeg. The land the government bought is little better than their old reserve because its low elevation will leave it vulnerable to continued flooding.

The purchase of the land without the consent of the First Nation has added more animosity between the province and his people, Sinclair says.

The provincial government has been flooding Lake St. Martin for as long as the chief can remember, he says. His sister, Diane, remembers bitter conversations with her grandparents about the water that would invade their reserve every year, causing their homes to grow mould, and ruining their hunting and fishing seasons.

The problems of the Lake St. Martin reserve worsened when the provincial government built the Fairford River Water Control Structure in 1961. It controls the water that comes from Lake Manitoba into Lake St. Martin and eventually empties into Lake Winnipeg. But the structure made matters worse for the reserve, which was located on low land and had always experienced some spring flooding even before it was built.

Chief Sinclair says the annual influx of water has left homes on the reserve permanently damaged by moisture.

The provincial government says the federal government will cover the expense of sheltering and feeding the evacuees. It has the responsibility for the establishment of reserves and has the final say in what land becomes a reserve.

Diane Sinclair says it's high time that Ottawa does something about the problems at Lake St. Martin. When the evacuation was ordered after the big flood of 2011, she thought the community's problems would finally be solved and a new reserve would be created on land that is high and dry.

Chief Sinclair says the federal government hasn't taken much of an interest in their recent problems and has offered them little help. A spokesperson for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development denies that claim. "The chief federal representative and the province of Manitoba have been fully engaged with representatives of the First Nation for well over a year in attempting to find both short- and longer-term solutions to the impact of flooding on the community which are acceptable to all parties," said Jan O'Driscoll.

WHILE THEY WAIT for both levels of government to make up their minds, Chief Sinclair is realizing many of his people have no experience living away from their land. Many still fished and hunted, just as their ancestors had for decades. Now members of the First Nation are being exposed to things they never were before.

"There is so much influence here. A welfare cheque doesn't go that far," Sinclair says. "On the reserve, there is only one option: you go to the store and back. Here there are so many things: drugs, booze, gambling. It's really starting to have an effect on people."

Eugene Sinclair and his first cousin, Chief Sinclair, say they hear stories every day about their children and teenagers not being equipped to deal with the big city. Both men say that Lake St. Martin children and teenagers are falling victim to gangs and sexual violence.

Chief Sinclair says his community's traditional way of life has now been ruined. "My people lived off the land, fishing, trapping, selling fence posts. They did a lot of things. Now that is all taken away because of the flood."

They were like foreigners when they got to Winnipeg, he said, and now they've been forced to live on just a few dollars a day. The evacuees received a notice in November bearing no letterhead, saying the \$23 daily allowance they were receiving for food and expenses, other than rent, would fall to \$4.

Eugene Sinclair, a diabetic in his 40s, has been living in a hotel for two years. He is now in the Place Louis Riel Hotel in downtown Winnipeg, struggling since his benefits have been cut. He is finding it hard to take care of himself and cook proper meals and says he knows several other people getting sick from a lack of proper nutrition.

On the reserve there were plenty of fish to be caught and wildlife to be hunted, but in the city, food doesn't come cheap. "I only get \$4 a day. What can you make for \$4 a day?" he asks.

The federal government has been providing the benefit money in line with what would be provided under provincial Emergency Social Services.

Chief Sinclair says despite the cut in benefit money, he's standing firm on his refusal to be pressured into moving to the temporary housing, or the land they didn't want that was bought by the government. "I'm tired of fighting. I want to go home. I want to take my people home."

Victoria Ptashnick, *Toronto Star*, Jan 6, 2013

Flooded out to save Winnipeg, Lake St. Martin residents now feel forgotten

When she realized she would lose her fight with cancer, Ruth Beardy was determined to spend her final days at home. But instead of travelling to the shores of Lake St. Martin, where she'd been born and spent most of her 76 years, Mrs. Beardy died on Oct. 20 nearly 300 kilometres to the south – on the 23rd floor of a hotel near Portage and Main. [More Related to this Story](#)

Chief Adrian Sinclair of the Lake St. Martin First Nation says the band has found a spot for a new home that is much better than what the province is proposing. [They shouldn't have flooded us out in the first place – they left us hanging with nothing.](#) video

Video: The displaced people of Lake St. Martin, Manitoba. A mandatory evacuation in 2011 forced residents of the Lake St. Martin reserve to leave without the chance to properly go through their belongings since they thought they would be returning.

Still waiting for the promised land

"She wanted to go back; she wanted to be home," explains Christina Moar, her daughter, perched on a bed in the Place Louis Riel suite her father, Willie, now occupies alone. "This was the only home she had."

Lake St. Martin is now more a ghost town than what was once home to more than 1,400 people. The community was forced to leave abruptly in May of 2011 when Manitoba decided to spare Winnipeg from the effects of the "superflood" – the largest spring runoff in provincial history – by diverting water into several northern native centres. Residents were rushed to Winnipeg, thinking they'd be back in weeks, if not days. But the flooding was so severe that the site, a reserve for 140 years and home to native people for longer than anyone can remember, is uninhabitable – even after a \$100-million emergency channel was dug last year to lower the lake level. People now face the prospect of spending yet another holiday season stranded in the big city.

They shouldn't have to be there. Much has been done, by the band's council and by the province, to find a new place to live. Yet it has been anything but a joint effort. Canada's aboriginal people have a constitutional right to be consulted on decisions that affect them, yet Manitoba has spent \$1.5-million to buy 3,200 acres for a new reserve site that community leaders reject. And it has invested \$14-million to set up temporary housing at a third location that elders claim is infested with snakes.

In the end, Mrs. Beardy got what she wanted. She now lies in her community's little cemetery, which on the surface seems a fitting final resting place, with its fading floral tributes and spare white crosses that glow every evening when solar lights planted years ago flicker on.

The ground below, however, is saturated. Graves become pools as quickly as they are dug, and "you have to bury the people in the water," says Florence Wood, 65, a member of Lake St. Martin First Nation who intended to retire there after spending many years away. But those plans have been pretty much abandoned. "Where my house stands," she says, "is all mud."

Chief Adrian Sinclair and his council say they have found a spot for a new home that is much better than what the province is proposing. It is high and dry and located several kilometres from the lake that gives the community its name, but that's just fine, Mr. Sinclair says: His people have had quite enough of living on the water.

The cost of sheltering more than 2,000 evacuees from Lake St. Martin and five neighbouring reserves is approaching \$70-million and the New Democrats under Premier Gregory Selinger grow

increasingly exasperated.

The federal government will eventually cover the costs of sheltering and feeding the evacuees. It is also responsible for establishing reserves and ensuring the welfare of those who occupy them. But thus far Ottawa has shown little interest in discussing where Lake St. Martin's displaced residents will wind up.

That, according to Paul Martin, is not good enough. "When somebody has a fiduciary responsibility," says the former prime minister, who now spends much of his time working to improve aboriginal education and business opportunities, "they also have a responsibility to talk to the people to whom they have that responsibility."

The big flood of 2011 marked the breaking point, but Lake St. Martin's problems began half a century earlier.

In 1961, in a bid to protect agricultural and recreational land in the area, the province built a control structure on the Fairford River, which flows from Lake Manitoba through Lake St. Martin before emptying into the great expanse of Lake Winnipeg.

The effect on Lake St. Martin, as well as such neighbouring native communities as Fairford, Little Saskatchewan and Dauphin River, was immediate. When the weather was dry, water that normally flowed through the reserves was held back to keep Lake Manitoba from dropping. When it was wet, the smaller lakes were inundated to keep the larger body of water in a range deemed best for the residents around it.

Born when the reserve supported farming as well as fishing, Betty Travers, 73, recalls that "we used to have cattle. Across the river, there was a pasture and the first floods were all over there." Gradually, "our cattle became sick. Their hoofs came off and we had to sell them all - what was left of them."

Over the years, the land became permanently sodden. Crawl spaces under homes filled with water and septic tanks popped out of the ground like corks. Even roofs began to rot.

Then came last year's superflood. Homes that were not in good shape to begin with - walls subjected to decades of black mould had been painted repeatedly just to hide the stain - were left complete writeoffs. Now, having been uninhabited for so long, they provide shelter for weasels, mice, frogs and other vermin. Some have been vandalized.

The federal government had said for years the reserve should move to a better location, talk that was sporadic and unproductive until hundreds of people were suddenly living in hotels.

A month after the evacuation, the province and community representatives jointly examined a series of sites to see if they were suitable as a new home. As far as the band was concerned, a parcel identified as Site 9 stood out, and Mr. Sinclair quickly informed both governments.

Instead, six months later, the province quietly purchased a tract adjacent to the old reserve. Lake St. Martin officials say they learned of the deal from the property's former owners only after the papers had been signed.

Not only is this site little better than what was flooded, Mr. Sinclair argues, it should not have been bought without his knowledge or that of his council.

Then the province paid nearly \$14-million to acquire mobile homes and turn the nearby site of a

former radar base, a Cold War relic, into an interim home while a permanent one is being built. At first, Mr. Sinclair agreed, as long as certain conditions were met. Community elders told him the property was on the path that garter snakes use by the thousand to reach their wintering ground. So he asked that the housing not be installed until last fall's migration was over and be moved to a permanent site before this fall's began.

But then, as the province was making the base habitable, the chief received words of caution from a Cree community to the north that had been relocated to temporary quarters near The Pas in 1962 after a hydroelectric project flooded its land. Fifty years later, the Cree were still there.

Mr. Sinclair started to worry. He had agreed to propose that his community move to the base if the province could provide assurances that it was moving ahead with an acceptable plan for a permanent location. But no work was being done elsewhere, and he was concerned as well that there had been no environmental study of the old radar site.

In any event, Mr. Sinclair says, he felt he had no authority to tell his people where to go; the decision was theirs to make.

He also dismisses any suggestion that his reticence stemmed from the fact he and a business partner were not chosen to supply the mobile homes. In fact, documents supplied by the band show that a community trust established for Lake St. Martin, not its chief, was to take 51 per cent of the profit from any such deal, with 49 per cent going to the partner, a local lumber dealer who knew how to build homes and had assisted the community after the flood.

The colourful, vinyl-sided housing now at the base is spacious, modern and far from the big city, where many people from Lake St. Martin say they are made to feel like outsiders, or worse - freeloaders and criminals. In March, when the houses were ready, some decided to take the offer despite any misgivings. But many have since moved back to Winnipeg, complaining of excessive supervision by non-native security hired to oversee the place and heavy-handed rules - no pets, no game brought back from a hunt, no visitors after 11 p.m.

Provincial officials call reports of such restrictive rules "both false and unsubstantiated" and dismiss the snakes as a myth. They say neither side is without blame for the mistrust that has developed, but insist they have done as much as they can to make the interim site livable.

Yet only 13 of the 65 houses at the base are occupied, and the province is looking for a way out. It has given holdouts still in the city until Dec. 15 to indicate if and when they plan to move in, and empty homes are already being given to other bands in need.

Eric Robinson, the provincial Minister of Aboriginal and Northern Affairs, says Lake St. Martin clearly requires a permanent home: "I think we need some decisive behaviour and I think I have demonstrated that, the federal government has demonstrated that as well, and now we need the first nation to be decisive as well."

And it is. Mr. Sinclair and his council have set their hearts on a 7,000-acre expanse of rust-coloured grassland punctuated by stands of white birch and spruce that they say is perfect. To bureaucrats who privately complain that the band seems to feel it has a right to make the final decision, the chief says: "They shouldn't have flooded us out in the first place - they left us hanging with nothing."

With an elevation more than 30 metres above that of the existing reserve, Site 9 is close to Highway 6, the main north-south route from Winnipeg to Thompson - ideal for roadside commerce to provide revenue to the band and employment to its people (especially given complaints that, in the process of lowering Lake St. Martin by nearly a metre, the much-ballyhooed channel has drained away much

of its precious fish population).

Mr. Sinclair envisions a gas station, a restaurant, a clothing store, Tim Hortons, a lumber yard and a place to set up the community's 65 video-gaming machines, currently in storage. "And a funeral parlour that sells caskets," he says. "That's a real money-maker."

But the province says that, even though the land is high, too much drainage work is needed to make the site viable – and it contends that the federal government, which has the final say on what becomes a reserve, has rejected it. The community will not relinquish the old reserve even as it seeks a new one, and Manitoba says Ottawa will not approve a property that is not connected to it because two separate sites would be too expensive to maintain.

Ottawa denies having said that, but neither has it acknowledged the selection of Site 9.

Mr. Sinclair blames the refusal to accept his people's choice on the fact that neither the government that caused the flooding nor the one that is supposed to protect aboriginal people wants to take full responsibility for the plight of Lake St. Martin. And the province, he adds, does not want to be stuck with the land that it went ahead and bought.

At the same time, there are signs of animosity between Manitoba and Ottawa. Provincial officials argue that, because they are willing to discuss the situation, they have undergone greater scrutiny – and unfairly taken more blame – than Ottawa has. Despite repeated requests, federal Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Duncan, a native of Winnipeg, declined to be interviewed.

When he was prime minister, Mr. Martin negotiated a series of accords to improve the lot of aboriginal people, but they were discarded when the Conservatives took power. He now feels that, the Lake St. Martin impasse notwithstanding, provincial governments are stepping up.

Because they deliver health care and education, and "end up with a lot of the problems in their own backyards, in their cities," he says, "they understand the issues far better ... the importance of supporting first nations as they attempt to take hold of some very difficult situations."

But the same cannot be said of their federal counterpart. "I think, if you talk to most of the first nations," Mr. Martin adds, "Ottawa just doesn't seem to return their phone calls."

Derek Nepinak, the Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, says the involvement of governments, federal or provincial, in the forced relocation of indigenous communities has a very "dark history."

Mr. Nepinak says he warned governments not to presume that they had a right to decide which land would become the new Lake St. Martin reserve, yet "right from the start, the province [felt] it could dictate to the community where it was going to relocate – and that has been unacceptable."

But the federal government is culpable too. "They had a responsibility to step forward and to help," he says. "not just with respect to the flooded-out lands but with respect to the consequences of having to live in the urban environment."

According to Mr. Nepinak, the two governments point to the millions they have spent on the displaced. "But they should have been at the table right from the start, willing to negotiate and figuring out ways of fast-tracking a new reserve."

Clearly, neither Ottawa nor the province is happy with all the money being spent. Last month, evacuees received a notice, bearing no letterhead or signature, saying the \$23 a day they were

receiving for food and expenses other than rent will fall to \$4 – what they would receive had they moved to the radar base.

Shocked, the people wonder how, unable to fish or hunt, they will get by in Winnipeg? And why was such a radical move done anonymously?

Manitoba officials say the letter was generic because the reduction was a joint decision, and neither government wanted to face the backlash. Ottawa, however, says that is not true – the call was that of province alone. (Manitoba also points out that anyone who collected welfare before the flood can continue to do so, although not everyone was.)

Mr. Sinclair insists that he and his people will somehow stick it out in Winnipeg until they can move to Site 9. Gazing across the property, he says he can easily envision the community being happy there. “You see how beautiful the land is, how high it is?” he says, gesturing to a broad swath where horses now graze.

And yet, he adds, they will not give up the existing reserve, even if it is little more than a swamp: That is where their ancestors are buried – both in the cemetery and in unmarked graves all along the water’s edge.

But there is no going home. The province plans to raise the 100-year-flood mark by five feet, ruling out new construction on all but 15 per cent of the reserve.

Meanwhile, all but a few existing homes sit empty. The two-bedroom house band councillor Mathew Traverse once shared with his wife, six children and three grandchildren is uninhabitable. The ceiling tiles are falling off, the floors are covered in the flotsam of a hasty departure, and the smell of mould is so strong that his fellow councillors will not enter.

But to the wistful Mr. Traverse, this is where the family used to feast after a successful hunt, where he used to teach his children the importance of living off the land.

“The 2011 flood just destroyed this house. It just destroyed us,” he says, struggling to keep his emotions in check. “We need a reserve and we need a reserve soon. We are Anishnabe, we are proud people. Why is it we have to fight all this way for something that should have been given to us, that should have been ours?”

Back in Winnipeg, Christina Moar has new worries. Currently living in a rental unit, she wants to return to the hotel to be closer to her father, who does not hear well and could, she fears, fall victim to unscrupulous strangers.

Whom does she blame for her predicament? She says she has no idea, but pauses and adds, “The people who say no to letting us get the land for a new reserve.”

Next week, federal and provincial officials are finally to sit down with the Lake St. Martin council in an attempt to solve a problem 50 years in the making. In a recent letter to Mr. Duncan, the federal minister, Mr. Sinclair made it clear how he and his people feel the negotiations should play out.

“If the last 18 months have taught the first nation and the federal and the provincial government anything,” he wrote, “it is surely that decisions made by either or both governments based on inaccurate or inadequate information, speculative reasoning and assumptions, and in secrecy, can and do have disastrous consequences.”

In other words, a little consultation would go a long way.

Gloria Galloway, *The Globe and Mail*, Nov. 24 2012

Swept away

At the peak of last year's flood (2011), 3,098 residents had been removed from six aboriginal communities in Manitoba's Interlake region. Since then, roughly one in three has gone back, leaving stranded:

1,056 - Lake St. Martin
358 - Little Saskatchewan
212 - Dauphin River
185 - Peguis
102 - Ebb & Flow
19 - Pinaymootang

Total - 1,932

Source: Province of Manitoba

P.S.

* From:

<http://www.rogerannis.com/grim-fate-for-thousands-of-indigenous-still-stranded-from-2011-manitoba-flood/>