

Natives end blockade, begin negotiations

By Donna Hooper
The Canadian Press

A group of natives has ended its blockade of an ancient burial site but its dispute with the federal government over ownership of the national historic site is far from over.

About 15 to 25 natives dismantled their blockade Tuesday at the entrance to Fort Temiscamingue, at the narrows of Lake Temiskaming that straddles the Ontario-Quebec border.

The protest began Thursday when the breakaway group from three bands closed the site to visitors, citing security concerns about human remains that were uncovered by Parks Canada construction crews last spring.

"They were operating on misinformation," said Peter DiGangi, director of the Algonquin Nation Secretariat, about the protesters.

DiGangi represents the Timiskaming and Wolf Lake bands — two of four Quebec bands involved in the wildcat protest. The other bands are Long Point and Eagle Village.

"If they had taken the time to talk to the leadership the whole issue of security could have been dealt with easily," he said.

DiGangi said the band elders resolved the security issue with the protesters but the site will remain closed while the bands continue their efforts to negotiate a larger issue with the government.

The natives believe they have a strong claim to the land where the fort is located after Parks Canada uncovered the remains of four Algonquin people, dating back to the early 1700s.

The remains were found during reconstruction of the site to emphasize its importance as a fur trading centre, said DiGangi.

"We think the fur trade part of the site is minor in comparison to the new find," he said.

"We think that any development or work by Parks Canada has to deal with our legal interest in the land."

Parks Canada agreed to

stop reconstruction and close the site after members of the four bands occupied the area briefly on June 29 to emphasize their claim to the land. The second blockade was not approved by the bands.

Steve Briand, site superintendent for Parks Canada, expects Fort Temiscamingue will be closed for the summer. The site includes an interpretative centre, the remains of an fur trading post and two cemeteries dating back to the 1800s.

"The blockade is removed and we are now in negotiation meetings," said Briand, who returned to the site Tuesday

afternoon.

"Construction for the new development is all finished for now."

Fort Temiscamingue is considered the jewel of Lake Temiskaming by locals. But the beauty of the historic and strategic location has resulted in a tug-of-war between those who covet its assets. Fur traders and native settlers travelled the route by canoe and archaeologists have uncovered buried artifacts and the fort's foundations. But natives say their claim extends back 6,000 years. -CP-