

Red tape prevents natives from

returning to reserves

TORONTO (CP) — Native people living off reserves often find government red tape an impossible barrier to regaining their official Indian status, the president of the Ontario Metis and Aboriginal Association said Tuesday. "Because of the tough documentation requirements, some (eligible) applicants are being rejected for registration and others are becoming

frustrated and simply giving up," Charles Recollet told an inquiry examining the effects of amendments to the federal Indian Act.

The inquiry, a joint project by three national aboriginal associations, is studying the effects of Bill C-31, which amended the federal Indian Act in 1985 to remove discriminatory passages.

Gained status

Before the bill was passed, Indian men who married non-Indian women did not lose status, and their wives gained status.

But Indian women who married non-native men lost their status, as did their dependents.

The amended act reinstates those women and their descendants, who can apply for status providing they have sufficient documentation.

The federal government has

said it underestimated the number of people who would apply for reinstatement.

Of the estimated 200,000 aboriginal people living off reserves in Ontario, 160,000 are Metis or non-status Indians, Recollet said.

About 35,000 of them have made applications, and about 7,000 of them are expected to move back to reserves if they regain their status, he said.

But many natives from remote areas can't fill out reinstatement forms in either French or English, Recollet said.

Others, often living below the poverty line, can't afford what is sometimes a long trek back to the reserve to look for documents to prove they are eligible.

As native people ran into trouble applying, staff with the

federal Indian Affairs department withdrew assistance and simply shelved applications, other witnesses told the inquiry.

Fights tape

Christie Cook, who was born on a remote Manitoba reserve, said she attended the hearings to see if she could get help to regain her status.

Living in Toronto, more than 600 kilometres from her birthplace, she had felt "fighting through the red tape" wouldn't be worth it, she said.

But regaining her status is important to her now because her son would like a university education that she, as a single mother, can't afford.

If she is registered as a status Indian, the Indian Affairs department would help pay those expenses.