

National chief of Canada's First Nations condemns raid on Mi'kmaq traps

HALIFAX (CP) — Non-native fishermen accused of firing shots and cutting native lobster traps are evidence of an unwillingness to share resources they've controlled for centuries, says national aboriginal leader Matthew Coon Come.

"They want this resource exclusively for themselves, as they have for the past several hundred years, while our people live in poverty," Coon Come told about 200 delegates at a native economic development conference Wednesday.

During the raid last Sunday on New Brunswick's Miramichi Bay, about 50 boats swarmed a legal fishing zone set up for the Burnt Church reserve by the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

Native fishermen charged onto the water in smaller boats to protect their traps, resulting in a tense chase. RCMP said about 30 gunshots were fired during the two-hour confrontation. No charges have yet been laid.

Federal Fisheries Minister Herb Dhaliwal has condemned the actions of the commercial fishermen, calling them "illegal" and

"grossly irresponsible."

Coon Come, grand chief of the Assembly of First Nations, accused the non-natives of "creating social unrest ... to suit their own objectives."

"At this very moment we have people in boats chasing First Nations people away from a food fishery that Canada has approved," he said.

Coon Come quoted from reports by the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples that recommended solving native economics by improving their access to resources and restoring lands taken by white settlers.

"Our goal, our objective as First Nations, is self-sufficiency. In economic terms, self-sufficiency translates into the need to have our own source of revenue."

That won't happen if Ottawa doesn't recognize basic native treaty rights, including a say in how the commercial fishery is run, Coon Come said following his speech.

The Supreme Court of Canada, in a 1999 ruling, said natives have a right to earn a moderate livelihood from the fishery. The court later clarified that Ottawa could regulate the fishery

but should consult with native bands.

This year, 20 of 34 native bands in Atlantic Canada have signed fishing agreements with Ottawa that provided licences, fishing equipment and training to natives.

But Coon Come said the federal government hasn't seriously considered the Burnt Church First Nation's fishing plan. He also urged the RCMP to do more to protect the native fishing grounds off the Burnt Church reserve.

"It's very disappointing and alarming when you learn that the RCMP are just standing by and just watching what's going on," he said.

"Nobody is moving and that allows other people to take matters into their own hands."

Michael Belliveau, executive secretary of the Maritime Fishermen's Union, wondered if Coon Come really knows how much sharing non-native fishermen have been doing since the Supreme Court decision.

"He never comes down here and looks at the situation," Belliveau said in an interview.

"There's been an enormous amount of hard work done by fishermen and their organizations to reach agreements that will accommodate the decision and new native fishing rights."

He gave the example of the Big Cove, N.B., reserve, which now operates 40 commercial fishing vessels under deals made with the federal Fisheries Department.

The flareups in Burnt Church are the result of "a situation that hasn't been settled," said Belliveau. "Tensions are still high."

RCMP Insp. Kevin Vickers said most of the shots in the Sept. 16 conflict seemed to come from the Burnt Church shoreline, but said it wasn't clear if any of the shots were fired from boats.

But Coon Come said it was premature to say natives fired the guns.

"Let's look at an inquiry and see what the results will be. Let's see who fired guns," he said.