

Theresa Spence gets visits by Justin Trudeau, Adam Beach

OTTAWA - Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence spent a quiet Christmas morning with her family, opening presents with two of her five daughters.

But far from her home on James Bay, Spence entered the third week of a hunger strike Tuesday, an action she says won't end until Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Gov. Gen. David Johnston agree to sit down and talk about Canada's treaty relationship with First Nations leadership. Spence said her strike, that galvanized the Idle No More movement, is ultimately about respect: for treaties and for aboriginal peoples.

"A treaty is a document upon which we were supposed to build our future together and trust and honour each other," Spence said on Christmas Day, as she sat on Victoria Island in the middle of the Ottawa River, within view of the Peace Tower.

Spence, says she feels strong despite her constant hunger. She stopped eating solid food on Dec. 11. She continues to take lemon water, some fish broth "to ward off sickness," and medicinal teas prepared each morning by a friend.

But her hunger strike has entered a deadly serious

phase, a New Democrat MP said Thursday.

Charlie Angus, who stood by Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence as she began her fast on Dec. 11, says he's now reaching out to area chiefs to see what steps can be taken to solve what's at risk of becoming a national crisis.

"This is much bigger than Theresa Spence, it's much bigger than any individual community," Angus said Thursday as he prepared to travel to Ottawa to visit Spence on Friday. "This is across the country now, it really needs the prime minister to take action."

So far the Prime Minister's Office has been silent, but Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Duncan says he is concerned about Spence's health.

In a letter sent on Tuesday, Duncan urged Spence to end her protest and informed her that he is prepared to set up a working group between federal and First Nations representatives to discuss treaty and rights issues.

"I didn't ask for Minister Duncan," she said. "And I have dealt with him before. When I observe him, he doesn't have a mind of his own because, before he would answer a question, he would always look at his



Chief Theresa Spence and Justin Trudeau -CP-

people. He's not the Prime Minister."

On Thursday, an invitation was issued via Spence's Twitter account for talk show giant Oprah to come visit

Duncan re-issued his request Wednesday night.

"Given your willingness to accept meetings now I am hoping that you will reconsider my offer, as a Minister of the Crown, to meet or speak with you."

But she wants a meeting with Mr. Harper and the representative of the Crown, Governor-General David Johnston.

"They are partners of the treaties," Ms. Spence said. "First nations have been acting in good faith, honouring the relationships in our treaties. But it's time to

sit down with [the government and the Crown] and have a talk. I don't know why they are so afraid to come and meet."

As the leader of a sovereign nation, Spence wants a "nation-to-nation" meeting. "All treaties were signed by the Crown — the government — and our ancestors ... the treaties are there for a reason and either the prime minister doesn't understand them, or he doesn't want to respect them," she said.

Mr. Harper is unlikely to give in to a hunger strike, which could be interpreted as a form of blackmail. But Ms. Spence said she is in it for the long haul and is prepared to die.

"As we speak," she said, "our people are suffering

with the system that we have been living in for the past 100 years." Her First Nation is part of Treaty 9, also known as the James Bay Treaty, signed by some communities in 1905, and by others in 1906.

In the summers of 1905 and 1906, treaty commissioners from Ottawa, who spoke on behalf of King Edward VII, travelled north to negotiate with aboriginal leaders in order to "open for settlement, immigration, trade, travel, mining, lumbering, and such other purposes as His Majesty may seem to meet, a tract of country."

In return for \$5 and a portion of land, called a reserve, the signatories were assured that they would receive "benefits that served

to balance what they were giving."

According to the text of Treaty 9, the "reserves were set apart for them in order that they might have a tract in which they could not be molested, and where no white man would have any claims without the consent of their tribe and of the government."

For Spence and other First Nation leaders, the government has failed in its duty to consult First Nations, bringing into jeopardy the entire treaty relationship.

Bill C-45, the Conservative government's omnibus budget bill which passed earlier this month, contains changes to the Navigable Waters Act, including waterways in First Nations territory.

It also makes it easier to sell reserve land to non-natives.

There are a host of other bills coming down the pipe which leaders say take power away from First Nations leadership and put it in the hands of the federal government, thereby contravening the treaties and the nation-to-nation relationship.

Bill C-27 would require First Nations leadership to disclose their salaries.

Critics say the First Nations Education Act and Bill S-8, the Safe Drinking

Hunger strike into third week, Chief waits for Prime Minister

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Water for First Nations Act, may seem good on the outside, but were not crafted in consultation with aboriginal leaders and therefore go against the treaty relationship.

Spence said she is encouraged by youth as she watches Idle No More spread through malls and city halls nation-wide.

But she said she has also been overwhelmed "to see other countries and Canadian citizens standing with our people."

On Boxing Day Liberal leadership contender Justin Trudeau paid her a visit. The 45-minute meeting took place at the request of Trudeau, who wants to show solidarity with Spence.

"I didn't talk about an awful lot. I did a lot of listening," Trudeau said.

"What was most important for me was to share with her the fact that this current prime minister doesn't speak for all Canadians, that many people are supporting her and supporting her request that the prime minister meet with First Nations leaders and talk about the unfairness that exists across the country.

"Her request isn't that she gets to meet with the prime minister. Her request is that the prime minister agree to a serious engagement with leadership, with different levels of government, to talk about how we move forward in fairness as a country."

His visit was followed by the issuing of a letter by fellow leadership contender Marc Garneau who said Harper shouldn't be worried about setting a precedent by agree-



Chief Theresa Spence and Adam Beach and his daughter -CP-

ing to a meeting. Ms. Spence has emerged as the Idle No More movement hero and has had support from people such as Saulteaux actor Adam Beach, who stopped by over Christmas and First Nations leaders.

On Christmas Eve, aboriginal Conservative Sen. Patrick

Brazeau tried to visit Spence, but was turned down.

He told QMI Agency he finds it "increasingly curious that Ms. Spence meets with NDP, Liberal members but has declined every genuine attempt to meet with Conservative members.

"Rather than emotional, rational, factual decisions, she

has turned this rather political, no?"

Asked why she did not meet with Duncan or Brazeau, Spence said that "Trudeau is someone who's there for the youth, and he's seen by the youth as a leader today."

At Victoria Island where she is living, the atmosphere is light. There are fires and drumming and even the occasional round of song.

She begins her day with an early-morning smudging ceremony, and a cup of medicinal tea.

It was coincidental, she says, that her personal crusade began about the same time as the Idle No More Movement spread.

The disruptions are continuing across Canada. Boxing Day round dances were organized in shopping malls, and a blockade of a CN rail

track in southwestern Ontario continued into its sixth day. In downtown Vancouver, dozens of supporters disrupted Boxing Day traffic marching through the streets in solidarity. Some, like Bill Erasmus, Dene National Chief, have staged their own short-term hunger strikes in support.

But, as far as the federal legislation goes, Chief Erasmus says governments "don't have the right, don't have the power to" enact laws affecting first nations, which he says are independent from the rest of Canada.

That attitude of defiance, growing in first nations across the country, suggests this could be a long year of conflict between the government and indigenous people.