

# Inuit leader says Labrador community overwhelmed by rising tide of death

By Michael MacDonald

ST. JOHN'S, Nfld. (CP) — As if a murder and a rash of suicides weren't enough, the grim death toll in Labrador's largest Inuit community continues to climb. "The crisis response teams in Nain have been working like they've never worked before," William Barbour, president of the Labrador Inuit Association, said Thursday from the isolated community. "It's not just the suicides that we have been dealing with in Nain. It's the many, many other deaths we've been dealing with."

Since the beginning of the year, 15 people in Nain have died of various causes, including a variety of illnesses, Barbour said.

One of those who died was Barbour's own daughter. She was among three people who have committed suicide since Feb. 19. "Within Nain, we are dealing with a major crisis," Barbour said, making a few oblique references to his own "personal tragedy." "But it's not just Nain, it's all of our communities."

There are 4,800 Inuit in Labrador. About 1,300 of them live in Nain, the region's oldest and most northerly Inuit community.

The most recent death came early Wednesday when 15-year-old Martin Angnatok was shot dead in Nain.

Abraham Zarpa, 30, was charged Thursday with second-degree murder.

Within hours of the shooting, the Newfoundland government announced Premier Brian Tobin would lead a committee to study the chronic problems faced by Labrador aboriginals, who also include the Innu nation farther south. "We have not treated properly people who live in those isolated northern communities," Tobin said Thursday. "They have not had a fair share of the opportunities in this province. We almost need to say 'I'm sorry.' We need to correct it." Barbour welcomed Tobin's words. "The Inuit of Labrador have been waiting so long to hear that," he said, his voice cracking with emotion. "Part of our problem is that we've been treated with such disrespect. It's good to hear the premier say that has to be acknowledged."

Robert Nault, the federal Indian affairs minister, said he was ready to work with Tobin's new committee. "We are concerned as everyone else with this suicide that goes on, not just in the Inuit or Innu communities, but in the First Nations communities across the country."

When asked what could be done to ease the suffering of his people, Barbour said there had to be a "calm" before anything else happened. After careful reflection, the next step was to listen. "This community of Nain is in mourning, is in grief," he said. "We don't have answers, but we do want to listen."

The litany of social problems facing the Inuit and the Innu have been dissected and studied many times over the years. Yet widespread substance abuse, suicide and domestic violence persists at levels far above the national average. Part of the problem is that the young Inuit in Nain, most of whom are jobless, are frustrated by delays holding up development of the proposed nickel and cobalt mine at Voisey's Bay. "We have been training our people to be ready to enter that workforce at the mine site," Barbour said. "There is some sense of disappointment out there. How much longer do we wait for this? But the last thing I want to do is lay blame." Development of Voisey's Bay, which is 35 kilometres south of Nain, has been on hold for three years.

Talks between the Tobin government and Inco Ltd. broke off in January after the company refused to guarantee ore from the \$4.3-billion mine would be processed in Newfoundland.

William Barbour, president of the Labrador Inuit Association, says there are no "quick fix answers." Officials say alcohol is a factor.

The province says there are many other issues, including a lack of proper housing, unresolved land claims and high unemployment.