

First Nations advocates use protests, legislation to maintain pressure on Harper

OTTAWA - For the second day in a row, the Harper government faced growing questions from opposition MPs on the living standards of First Nations people and the now worldwide Idle No More movement that has drawn global attention to Canada's treatment of First Nations.

During Tuesday's Question Period, Liberal Leader Bob Rae challenged the Prime Minister on what his government was doing to improve the water standards in First Nations. "The facts on the ground do not live up to the rhetoric in here," he told the Prime Minister.

Harper told him, "this government has made massive investment in First Nation water problems."

On Monday, First Nations protesters chanted, danced and waved placards and banners on the snowy pavement in front of the Parliament buildings on Monday as MPs returned to work after their six-week winter break.

Idle No More movement demonstrations were held across the country, as natives joined other activists to oppose Stephen Harper's changes to environmental oversight and urge action on native rights.

A simple message from one unidentified Algonquin grandmother on the Hill seemed to bring the argument into focus. She pleaded with the Harper government to reinstate environmental protections for Canada's waterways that were removed in the last om-

nibus budget bill.

"We need water to live," she said.

"And we have to make sure that this message gets to the people that are sitting in this (House of Commons)."

In Halifax, more than 200 demonstrators marched peacefully across the city's Angus L. Macdonald Bridge.

As about 200 protesters gathered on Parliament Hill, NDP critic Romeo Saganash tabled a private member's bill in the Commons which would require that all federal legislation be compatible with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Saganash was a key architect of the declaration.

"The prime minister still hasn't honoured his commitments from last year to restore a respectful dialogue with First Nations," Saganash said.

"By harmonizing federal laws with the UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights, he would be taking an important step towards reconciliation."

The Conservatives have endorsed the declaration but see it as a non-binding "aspirational" document that has no impact on Canadian legislation.

Behind the scenes, the Assembly of First Nations officials are talking to government officials about meetings between Harper and National Chief Shawn Atleo that would deal with modernizing ancient treaties and speeding up land claims.

That process is "off to a



While MP debated First Nations issues inside, outside Idle No More took to the street in front of the Parliament Buildings Mondays. (Special to Turtle Island News Chris Wattie Reuters)

good start," said Conservative House Leader Peter Van Loan.

He said the government envisions two separate processes: one for modernizing treaties, and the other for speeding up land claims.

But he said there is no way the Harper government will back down from changes to environmental oversight contained in two budget omnibus bills that were passed last year.

The budget bills were designed to encourage natural resource extraction, but critics say they weakened environmental stewardship.

It's the one area that unites First Nations grassroots activists, chiefs and environmentalists alike.

"Among the greatest ben-

eficiaries of those changes will be First Nations," Van Loan said. "We are firmly committed to the changes that we have made. It's part of ensuring Canada's long-term economic prosperity."

That just shows that the Tories have closed their ears to the pleas of protesters demanding change, said Kitigan Zibi Chief Gilbert Whiteduck.

"The government is not listening," he said. "Canadians are listening, but this government is not listening."

The prime minister disagreed, telling the Commons that his government is listening, and acting.

"Protection of aboriginal treaty rights and also consultations in these various processes are, in fact, en-

shrined in the very laws that this government has passed," said Harper.

We have made on top of that, Mr. Speaker, unprecedented investments into things that will make a concrete difference in the lives of people."

But some doubt Harper's true commitment.

Harper might have apologized for residential schools, but its clear to us that the only thing he is sorry about is that we weren't wiped out completely," said Coun. Bryan Laboucan from the Lubicon Lake Nation in Alberta.

"The ongoing interference with our governance structures and assimilation tactics are cultural genocide, in fact the United Nations have cited

the government of Canada repeatedly for these human rights abuses against our people."

Interim Liberal leader Bob Rae said the government's goal can't be reached without native participation.

"We're only going to have major resource development in the country, in the north of this country, if we have a better working relationship with the First Nations people right across the country," he said.

Supporters of the Idle No More movement were among those protesters also gathered in Kelowna, B.C., where hearings into the Northern Gateway pipeline project are underway.

-The Canadian Press-