

CPTnet
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by Bob Holmes

NEW BRUNSWICK: CPT ends commitment at Esgenoopetij

The Band Council of the Esgenoopetij First Nation (EFN) and Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) have agreed in principle to end the three year standoff over the exercise of Mi'kmaq Aboriginal fishing rights in Burnt Church, New Brunswick, rights protected by treaties, entrenched in the Canadian Constitution Act and recognized by the Supreme Court of Canada.

The exercise of these fishing rights in the summers of 1999, 2000 and 2001 was the source of sometimes violent conflict between the native and non-native lobster fishers. Federal fisheries officers responded to the Mi'kmaq's fishing with repressive enforcement of government regulations. The EFN invited Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) to Esgenoopetij in 2000 and again in 2001, in an attempt to reduce the violence--physical and structural--imposed on this small native community.

I visited Esgenoopetij at the end of July 2002 to assess the need for a CPT presence this summer. The Band Council, newly elected in May after a contested and annulled election last fall, was held "behind closed doors." Rumours of an agreement were in the air everywhere. In the midst of a warm welcome by our Mi'kmaq fisher-friends, I sensed a resignation -- equal parts disappointment and relief -- that the fishing war was over. People expressed gratitude for CPT's solidarity but clearly this year, with an agreement imminent, a team would not be needed.

After gracious good-byes and arranging for the sale of the CPT trailer, I departed for Ontario. By the time I arrived, the agreement-in-principle was announced. The EFN Council has agreed to respect the federal right of regulation. The federal government in turn recognizes its treaty obligation to provide for a moderate living. It will give the EFN community another twenty-one commercial licenses for the spring lobster fishery (they have 13 presently), increase their quota of snow crab, pay for more native boats and underwrite training. A fall fishery for food and ceremonial purposes only, not for sale, will be limited to 13,500 kilograms. The cost to the government for the deal is estimated at between 20 to 25 million dollars over two years.

Is it a good deal or a bad one? Is it a re-negotiation of treaty rights or an extinguishing of Aboriginal fishing rights? Will it bring peace or will the conflict continue - with angry non-native fishers, with dissident native

fishers? Whichever, CPT respects the right of the members of the EFN community to decide their own future and is grateful for the opportunity we were given to stand with them in their lonely, courageous fight for their way of life.

Christian Peacemaker Teams is an initiative among Canadian and U.S. churches committed to active peacemaking, which prepares small teams to intervene in violent and militarized regions using active nonviolence. Contact CPT, PO Box 72063, 1562 Danforth Ave., Toronto ON M4J 5C1, ph 416-423-5525, fax 416-423-9213, email cptcan@web.ca; or CPT, POB 6508 Chicago, IL 60680, ph 312-455-1199, fax 312-432-1213, email cpt@igc.org. To join CPTNET, visit us on the WEB: www.cpt.org