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## Report: Canada could see indigenous uprising

Former military official says poverty and anger in indigenous communities mean conditions for an "insurgency" are ripe.

Chris Arsenault Last Modified: 14 May 2013 10:21

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Canada has recently seen a wave of indigenous protest through the Idle No More Movement [Reuters]

Living standards for indigenous people on par with "third world" countries, buttressed by a large population of unemployed young men in a "warrior cohort", and easy-to-target economic infrastructure, all mean Canada has conditions for a potential indigenous "insurgency".

That's according to a **new report** penned by a former Canadian military officer for the MacDonald Laurier Institute, a think-tank supported by corporate executives.

"For many Aboriginal people in Canada, but especially for First Nations women and children, life on-reserve is dreary, dark and dangerous," wrote Douglas Bland in the report, *Canada and the first Nations: Cooperation or Conflict?* "Social fractionalisation significantly increases the risk of social conflict. The phenomenon provides motives for an insurgency," read the report, issued in May.

Bland refused interview requests from Al Jazeera, but conclusions from the Queen's University professor emeritus and 30-year military veteran have worried the Canadian establishment, especially in light of indigenous-led protests associated with the Idle No More movement, and Canada's increasing dependence on natural resource extraction.

### 'Ongoing injustice'

"The Canadian right-wing establishment is seizing on this to justify its own agenda of stricter controls and

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the continued criminalisation of native people who defend their rights," Taiiaki Alfred, chair of the centre for indigenous governance at the University of Victoria, and one of Canada's most influential aboriginal intellectuals, told Al Jazeera. "The positive elements of Canadian society - progressive values and social justice - are founded on the ongoing injustice of land theft and murder of indigenous people."

In November, Paul Martin, Canada's former prime minister and a business tycoon, echoed Alfred's comments, albeit in a softer tone. "We have never admitted to ourselves that we were, and still are, a colonial power," he said.

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*We have never admitted to ourselves that we were, and still are, a colonial power*”

*Paul Martin, former prime minister*

One of the world's most developed countries, Canada is home to about 1.2 million indigenous people out of a population of 34.5 million. The indigenous population is rising faster than other demographic groups, despite drastically higher rates of poverty, incarceration and substance abuse.

If indigenous Canadians were ranked as a country according to the United Nations Human Development Index, which measures living standards and life expectancy, they would have social outcomes comparable to residents of Kazakhstan and Albania.

Across Canada's prairies, the heartland of the country's agricultural industry and a centre for mining, about 42 percent of the indigenous population will be under the age of 30 by 2016, more than twice the youth rate in the non-indigenous community.

"The fact that Canada's natural wealth flows unfairly from Aboriginal lands and peoples to non-Aboriginal Canadians is a long-standing and justifiable grievance," the report said.

A large number of poorly educated, unemployed young men - a "warrior cohort", as Bland put it - provide fertile recruits for militant groups, the report says.

Using a formula first developed by researchers at Oxford University, Bland argued that the "feasibility" of unrest, rather than just root causes, could determine outcomes. Most of Canada's resource industries, including mines, dams and oil facilities, are located on land claimed by indigenous people - and attacking such facilities is easily feasible, the report said.

Comprising about four percent of the population, indigenous people make up 23 percent of Canada's prisoners, a 43 percent increase during the five years prior to 2013, according to a government report released in March.

There is near universal acceptance that the status quo is unacceptable, but across Canada's coffee shops, factories - and even within the MacDonald Laurier Institute - there is no consensus on the causes.

### Other solutions

In a separate report for the institute, former government senior economic adviser Brian Lee Crowley and professor Kevin Coates paint an optimistic picture, far removed from fears over blockades, sabotage or a full-blown uprising.

"Blockades may be news," they wrote, "but the new joint ventures, long-term training programmes and successful indigenous businesses are what will reshape our common future."

They argue that indigenous communities are ready to hit a "sweet spot" as a series of Supreme Court decisions on long-standing treaties will give them a larger stake - environmental and financial - in natural resource development.

Other intellectuals, however, say support for mines, dams and other megaprojects with large environmental costs won't help get people out of poverty, and are contrary to indigenous support for sustainability.

"Crowley's argument is what the government has been saying for the last 150 years; historical experience has shown that it doesn't work," Peter Kulchyski, professor of native studies at the University of Manitoba, told Al Jazeera. "The communities that are worst off tend to be close to these resource developments ... These partnerships between natural resource exploitation companies and First Nations generate some cash for the reserve elite, but not much in terms of employment opportunities for average people."

Especially in northern Canada, many indigenous people still depend on hunting and trapping for their food, and Kulchyski says this way of life should be preserved through land management deals, the sale of meat and eco-tourism projects rather than large-scale developments - which often imperil the land.

### Financial confusion

On reserves, the territory of indigenous Canadians, property rights function differently than in other parts of

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
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
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the country, making it difficult for residents to buy and sell their homes or land because the territories are often administered through a form of communal property law.

Outside large-scale resource extraction, a lack of property rights make business development difficult, conservatives argue, contending that free markets are needed to end poverty.

Many Canadians blame indigenous leaders for the poverty of their communities, arguing corruption is rampant on reserves. Conservative Canadians often say indigenous people should leave their traditional territories on remote lands where employment opportunities are scarce and move to cities where jobs, training and education are more easily accessible.

After going on a hunger strike and making international headlines in an attempt to draw attention to the dire poverty faced by residents of Attawapiskat, a northern indigenous community, Chief Teresa Spence faced insinuations of mismanagement in January, after the government leaked an audit showing accounting gaps in more than \$100m of federal transfers to the community.

Many Canadians say indigenous people receive too much money from the federal government, but Kulchyski says that isn't true. "The money comes to them from a separate envelope, so that's where the confusion comes from," he said. "They are actually getting less money than the rest of us [on a per capita basis] and that is reflected in the horrifying living conditions people are dealing with."

Bland's Laurier Institute Report comes on the heels of renewed interest in indigenous issues from Canadian society, following Chief Spence's hunger strike and the Idle No More movement, a campaign driven by social media and popular protest to draw attention to poverty and marginalisation.

Professor Alfred, who fought as a US marine before joining academia, believes Idle No More is a positive step for education, but its ability to change fundamental social structures is limited. He said he thinks recent reports about a possible "insurgency" are vastly overblown and based on poor research; part of a political ploy by another ex-military man to gain more funding for a broader crackdown against dissenters.

"As an activist, I am hoping and praying for more militant action," Alfred said. "But as a political analyst, there is no objective evidence that will happen. As it stands, all the evidence points to continued colonialism."

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