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Jailing of native protesters raising ire

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Natives say an OPP plan to use force hurts a strained relationship.

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~~APPROXIMATE~~

TORONTO -- An alleged plan by Ontario Provincial Police to break up a native protest with force and the recent incarceration of aboriginal leaders for protesting a mining site on their land are threatening the already fragile relationship between First Nations and governments, aboriginal leaders said yesterday.

Representatives from several northern Ontario First Nation communities gathered in Toronto to speak out against the cases of seven aboriginal protesters -- including a chief and deputy chief -- who last week were handed six-month jail sentences for violating court orders and continuing protests against mining on their traditional lands.

The children of the jailed protesters will be without a parent for half a year, and the communities feel spurned by the Ontario government despite promises of a new, healthier relationship in the years ahead, said Chief Scott Jacob of the Webequie First Nation. "The decision last week to incarcerate (aboriginal) leadership to me is not a respectful, meaningful relationship," he said.



The Liberal government didn't want the protesters from the Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI) First nation to receive jail sentences and petitioned to the court on their behalf, but Premier Dalton McGuinty said he can't undo the court's decision. "There's an independent judicial process," McGuinty said.

Aboriginal Affairs Minister Michael Bryant said the government has already offered \$200,000 toward the protesters' legal fees and is willing to do more if they decide to appeal their convictions.

"There's no way that as long as they're incarcerated, we're going to be able to make much progress," Bryant said. "That's why we opposed in court their incarceration.."

But representatives from the KI and Ardoch Algonquin First Nations made it clear in a letter to McGuinty they don't feel the government is on their side.

"The indifference shown by your government towards the rights of First Nation communities, and the imposition of long jail terms and crippling fines in the name of the 'rule of law' has further eroded respect for both the legal system and the government of Ontario," the letter reads.

The communities were even more distressed after hearing a CBC report that alleged OPP Commissioner Julian Fantino told officers they should use force if necessary when facing protests during last June's aboriginal day of action.

"When people want to speak out for their rights and guns are pulled out . . . that is not right and that is not just and that is what's affecting our people today," said KI spokesperson John Cutfeet.

The CBC reported a series of notes handwritten by police officers outlined orders to carry out a morning raid of blockades that were set up on highways in eastern Ontario.

The raid did not take place, and protesters eventually removed the barricades, but some notes said the scene verged on "anarchy" at times, and suggested Fantino "would not/could not tolerate (Highway) 401 being closed all day."