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January 8, 2007

A Glimmer of Hope in a Forsaken Place

In dilapidated living conditions, natives await long-promised building programs

Globe and Mail

By Steve Lambert

Crammed into a ramshackle 65-square-metre house she shares with eight relatives, Juliette Turtle has resigned herself to a life without a decent roof over her head, a toilet or running water. "I've just learned to accept it because there's no housing," the 58-year-old says through a translator as she sits on her worn beige sofa beneath a leaky window.

A few steps away, one of Ms. Turtle's grandchildren lies in what passes for a bedroom -- a space with three mattresses covering almost every bit of the floor. Clothing is hung on hooks on the wall.

Outside is an outhouse the family members share -- a situation faced by almost every family on the Pikangikum reserve, 300 kilometres northeast of Winnipeg.

When the pit starts to fill with excrement, the Turtles fill it in, dig a new hole nearby, and move their floorless outhouse shack over it.

Also on the property are the gravesites of relatives, including some of the seven children Ms. Turtle has lost to suicide.

She's not sure why most of her 12 children took their own lives, but it's not shocking in a community that has suffered one of the highest suicide rates in the world.

"After all the things I've gone through, I'm hoping my grandchildren don't have to go through the same things," Ms. Turtle said.

The community of 2,300 has a host of problems that start with basic infrastructure.

Half of the 430 homes are falling apart and unfit to live in, yet continue to be occupied. Ninety per cent don't have running water or indoor toilets. Ms. Turtle and many other families haul water in jugs from the community's water treatment plant. Some draw water from a lake and boil it to make it safe.

Still, many in the community believe there is hope for the future.

After years of fighting with the federal government over funding, a deal to build water and sewer lines, and more housing may be close.

Federal officials and local leaders formed a working group in November to tackle the priority areas and will meet again this week.

Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice has promised swift action.

"We've made significant progress at the table," Mr. Prentice said in an interview last month. "In the new year, people will see us moving in a very tangible, concrete way."

Community residents are cautiously hopeful.

"This is something we've heard in the past," said Dean Owen, who served as chief for 18 months until last fall.

"There is hope . . . that all these things will start happening."

The band has received money to build about 10 new homes in each of the past several years, Mr. Owen said, but it's not enough to keep up with a growing population and the need to replace dilapidated houses.

Work to connect homes to the water treatment plant has been stalled since 2001, when the former Liberal government took over the band's finances. The books were in order, but the government felt the band was not addressing the community's social problems, including its alarming suicide rate.

Last September, a medical officer of health based in Kenora said Pikangikum's water troubles were putting residents at risk of disease.

The town's electrical supply -- a diesel generating station -- is so overtaxed that residents were told not to put up Christmas lights this season.

The 10 new houses expected to be built this summer will bring the generator to its maximum capacity.

Still, there are signs that life has begun to improve.

Mick Staruck, principal of Pikangikum's school, said the youth suicide rate peaked in 1999, when a half-dozen pupils in his Grade 7 class alone took their own lives. Over the past two years, only two children in the entire school have committed suicide.

Mr. Staruck credits a new wave of dedicated teachers recruited specifically from northern areas, along with new after-school programs and sports that have kept young people engaged and off the streets.

The school has forgone new supplies in order to hire its first-ever guidance counsellor as well as several teaching assistants.

Mr. Staruck has also managed to cut class sizes by turning the school's library and part of the kitchen into new classrooms.

In stark contrast with many of Pikangikum's crumbling, graffiti-covered homes, the school is brightly lit and lively.

Inside the computer room, wide-eyed children play on cutting-edge computers. An Internet club offers youngsters some hands-on learning after school is out. And five condemned shacks that once served as portable classrooms have been replaced by insulated, modern portables.

The school has been so successful in cutting the dropout rate that it is more crowded than ever, with 700 pupils now occupying the building designed for 350.

Elsewhere, the band council has started a youth patrol, whose members help ensure other children get home at night instead of hanging out on the street.

Pikangikum's elders are hoping the next generation will be able to lead a better life, but say that any improvement starts with the basics.

Joseph King, an elder who advises Pikangikum's band council, lives with nine relatives in a home with a rotting foundation.

His wish is simple: "One of my biggest desires is to see my grandchildren in their own homes."

Community in crisis

The federal government is promising to find solutions to a housing, water and suicide crisis that has plagued the Pikangikum reserve in Northwestern Ontario. Here is a timeline of recent developments:

* 2000: Nine young people in the community take their own lives. British suicide expert Colin Samson declares Pikangikum home to the highest known suicide rate in the world.

* May 2001: Citing the reserve's alarming social problems, the federal government takes control of the band's finances. Work on a new water system is suspended.

* Nov. 2002: A Federal Court judge rules the government acted improperly in seizing control of the band's finances.

* Oct. 2006: Health officials in Northwestern Ontario issue a report saying Pikangikum residents are at risk of serious diseases because the community lacks a proper water system.

* Dec. 2006: Pikangikum leaders and the federal Indian Affairs Department strike a working group to address the community's problems.