

Canadian Natives fighting for subsistence rights

The Associated Press

RESTIGOUCHE, Quebec—A band of Micmac Indians has cast its nets into the salmon-rich Restigouche River and dug in a showdown with the Quebec government over who can tell a Micmac when to fish.

The dispute is the latest flare-up in continuing friction of its 300,000 Indians and the federal or provincial governments.

Hundreds of riot-equipped Quebec provincial police and game wardens, backed by helicopters and an armored tugboat, swooped down on the Micmacs' Restigouche reservation twice this month to break up the Indians' salmon fishing in the river, at the spot where it empties into an arm of the Atlantic 75 miles northeast of the Maine border.

The Quebec Human Rights

League accused the police of repressive actions during the raids, and federal Solicitor-General Robert Kaplan said he would investigate the possibility of police-brutality charges.

The 1,600-member Micmac band set up barricades of logs and sandbags to block the four entrances to the reserve and keep out any new police raiders.

Last Thursday a conciliatory-sounding Quebec Premier Rene Levesque said sending the police against the Micmacs had been a "very debatable" decision. "I guarantee it won't happen again," he added.

Levesque's government, saying it wants to protect low salmon stocks, had set a quota of three days' salmon fishing per week for the Micmacs of Restigouche. But the Indians want to fish six days a week and object that Quebec has no jurisdiction over them.

The Micmacs, who also have settlements in Canada's four Atlantic provinces, claim they have aboriginal rights to their land and its fishing under the Royal Proclamation of 1763.

The proclamation reads in part, "The several nations and tribes of Indians ... reserved to them or any of their hunting grounds."

The Canadian federal government delegated power over fishing in Quebec to the Provincial government in 1922. But the chief of the Restigouche Micmacs, Alphonse Metallic, says his band will negotiate only with Ottawa officials. The Micmacs, who speak English, have long been uneasy dealing with the French-dominated Quebec government.

The salmon-fishing area around Restigouche is a favorite spot for sportsmen.