

April 07, 2009

<http://www.thestar.com/News/Ontario/article/615177>

Michael Oliveira
THE CANADIAN PRESS

The federal and Ontario governments must address the "open toxic wound" in the remote northern community of Attawapiskat and stop ignoring the health implications of fumes wafting through the reserve, opposition politicians and local leaders said Tuesday.

The remote fly-in aboriginal community of about 2,500 off the coast of James Bay recently had its elementary school torn down – almost a decade after it was closed down – because it sat atop the remains of an underground fuel leak from 1979.

Since 2000, elementary students have been moved to classrooms in portables, which critics have condemned as substandard and unacceptable.

Now, students have been out of class for about two weeks because of health concerns related to the dismantled school.

"The reason that people aren't going to school is because they're getting sick, people are being sent home because they've got headaches or are nauseous," said Gilles Bisson, the NDP member of provincial parliament who represents the area.

"It's one of those things where it's out of sight, out of mind – 500 miles north of anywhere and nobody's really paying any attention."

The former school site is bordered by the elementary school's portables, the local high school and many homes which are all impacted by the fumes, Bisson said.

New Democrat MP Charlie Angus called for independent investigators to determine whether there are health risks associated with the local contamination since residents have lost faith in the federal government.

He said there's a pressing concern that melting snow and spring rains will soon escalate the risks.

"The water will begin to form in this pit and if there's any kind of flooding we will be facing a community that is poisoned," he said.

The federal government plans to begin remediation of the contaminated site once the ground thaws and will work with the community, said Ted Yeomans, a spokesman for Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl.

"Our government remains ready and willing to work with the community to address their concerns based on facts and health and safety evidence, as usual," he said in an email.

"Our decisions are not and will not be made based on NDP photo-ops and political grandstanding."

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty said he's willing to work with the federal government, although he won't lead the effort.

"We really play more of a supportive role when it comes to what's taking place up there," he said.