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Protestors play the drum outside Queen's Park as part of the Aboriginal Day of Action on Thursday, May 29, 2008. (Adrian Wyld / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

## Aboriginals march in T.O., Ottawa on day of action

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CTV.ca News Staff

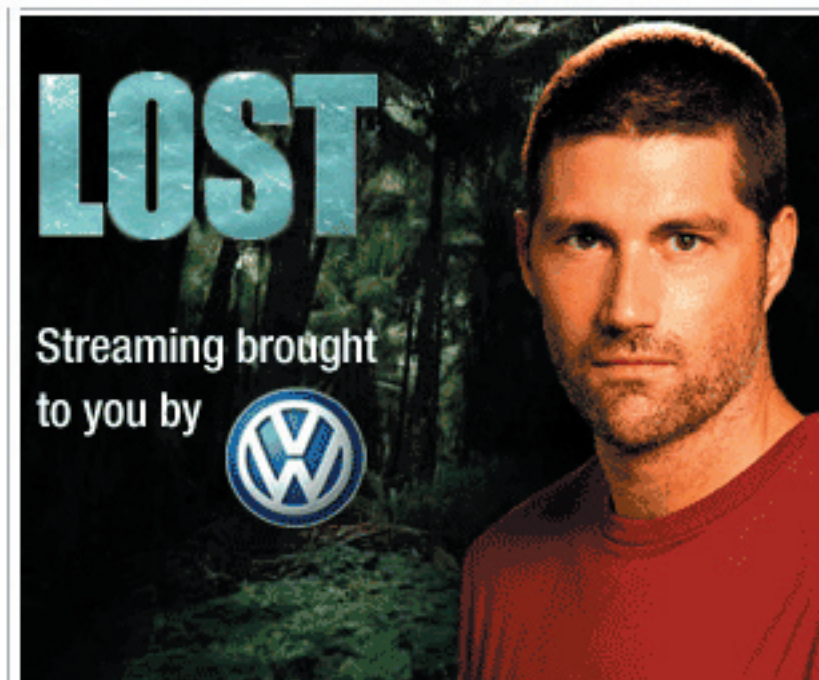
Members of First Nations communities across Ontario marched through the streets of Toronto and gathered on Parliament Hill in Ottawa Thursday as part of the second annual aboriginal day of action.

Hundreds of protesters camped out on the lawn of the Ontario legislature since Monday, hoping to raise awareness about native issues in Canada. They also want prior consent before


any industrial activity takes place on native land.

Chrissy Swain and 21 others walked 1,800 kilometres from Kenora to Toronto to take part in the event. She said it was a spiritual journey

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[Day of Action](#)



First Nations march on Parliament Hill as part of the National Day of Action. ↻

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and an act of protest over clear-cut logging rights near her home of Grassy Narrows.

"The walk came from frustration with the way our people get criminalized for standing up for our land and for our rights for future generations," Swain told CTV Toronto on Thursday.

Among those in attendance was Bob Lovelace, the leader of the Ardoch Algonquin First Nation. He recently served 105 days in jail over disputes about uranium mining exploration near Sharbot Lake.

"I do respect Canadian law, I respect the rule of law, but I think Canada also has to respect aboriginal law," Lovelace said.

Ontario Native Affairs Minister Michael Bryant visited the demonstrators at Queen's Park, and promised to work hard to address their concerns.

"The relationship over the course of our history has been an international embarrassment, which is why it is incumbent upon us to not only move on changes, but move very quickly," Bryant said.

The protestors packed up their teepees and belongings on Thursday morning and began their march through downtown Toronto in the early afternoon.

The group was expected to swell with an additional 2,000 people as they passed the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, where labour activists were gathered for a convention. The walk was expected to wrap up at the foot of Bathurst Street by 3:30 p.m.

On Parliament Hill, Phil Fontaine told CTV Ottawa the Day of Action has "never been about blockades."

"It's never been about shutting down the 401 (highway) or shutting down train service. It's really an attempt on our part to reach out to Canadians, to invite Canadians to join with us."

And while aboriginal poverty is concentrated on some reserves, Holly Danyluk of the Cree nation reminded it's also in cities like Ottawa.

"In Ottawa, there are a lot of people who live in poverty also, so I think (the Day of Action) is a great thing to do for aboriginal people."



Protestors march through downtown Toronto as part of the Aboriginal Day of Action on Thursday, May 29, 2008. (Adrian Wyld / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

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- CTV Ottawa: Norman Fetterley reports on the Day of Action 2:08
- CTV Ottawa: Shawn Atleo, Assembly of First Nations 3:35

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One group travelled from James Bay Coast to Ottawa, hoping to get promises and a timeline for a new elementary school for the Attawapiskat First Nation in northern Ontario.

But after meeting with Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl, the group left without any assurances.

At the Attawapiskat First Nation, about 400 children have been taught in eight portables since their school was closed in 2000 due to a diesel leak in the heating system.

Strahl says the situation isn't "ideal" -- but added it doesn't constitute a health and safety crisis.

As 13-year-old student Shannen Koostachin recounted her meeting with Strahl to the crowd of about 1,000 people, cries of "Shame!" rang out.

"Today, I feel down because Minister Chuck Strahl said he didn't have the money to build our new school. I didn't believe it. It's not right," Koostachin told the crowd.

#### Peaceful start

The aboriginal day of action got off to a peaceful start Thursday, with police reporting no incidents in volatile Caledonia, Ont., the epicentre of a land claims dispute.

Last year, protests shut down Highway 401 in Deseronto, a town in eastern Ontario, but Thursday morning there were no signs of any problems on the highway.

The Assembly of First Nations had urged demonstrators to respect the law for this year's day of action.

Students from a northern Ontario community also planned to be on Parliament Hill on Thursday to press their case for a new school.

The students from Attawapiskat, an isolated First Nations community off James Bay, will be meeting with Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl Thursday to try to end eight years of frustration.

About 400 students from the community have been attending school in portables since 2000. Parents pulled their children from J.R. Nakogee School at that time because of the numerous health problems reported there since a massive diesel leak in 1979.

In March, Strahl told Canada AM that the situation was unfortunate but

In March, Strahl told Canada AM that the situation was unfortunate but there were more pressing concerns in the native education budget.

In a statement, federal Liberal Indian Affairs critic Anita Neville said the day of action is an "embarrassment" for the Stephen Harper government and Canada's reputation.

"Last summer's day of action sent out a call for help to this government," Neville said. "That there is need for a second consecutive day of action is a sad sign that this government isn't listening."

Rallies were also expected at the B.C. legislature, in Prince Albert, Sask., Halifax, the Yukon and Northwest Territories, and other locations throughout the country.

*With reports from CTV Toronto, CTV Ottawa and files from The Canadian Press*