

Third World poverty afflicts Canadians, conference told

By Haroon Siddiqui Toronto Star

NEW DELHI — Canada has its own pockets of "Third World" poverty, an international conference on rural development has been told.

Lyla Commandant, administrator of the Mohawk Gibson Band from Baia, Ont., told the first-ever Global Exposition on Rural Development here that "living conditions on some Indian reserves are like Third World countries."

"The department of Indian affairs in Ottawa doesn't like to hear that, but that's the truth," said Commandant, part of the 22-member Canadian delegation at the conference.

Her sentiments were echoed by Lester Settle of Debert, N.S., who condemned the presence of "Third World spots in Canada."

Some of Canada's poor rural communities face problems similar to their counterparts in the underdeveloped world, said Settle, secretary of the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture.

The conference has attracted 500 delegates from 56 nations, including rural Americans as well as Australian aborigines, Mexican and Peruvian Indians and Harijans — the "untouchable" Hindus of India.

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Eight of the Canadian delegates are Indian or Metis. None, however, fits the stereotype of feathered natives from the frozen North. Young, confident and proud, they're proving popular here, as are the other Canadians.

The biggest visual impact has been created by eight Manitobans from a cable television co-operative, who stroll around in bright red jackets adorned with the maple leaf.

"We took the red off our flag and the design from our Olympic team outfits," chortles Wane Kines, leader of the team, dubbed the Red Brigades.

The conference is sponsored by the Institute of Cultural Affairs, a non-profit group active in 35 countries

The institute's Canadian executive secretary, Brian Williams of Toronto, is leading the Canadian contingent, drawn from eight provinces.

This is a global gathering like no other. There are no polished politicians, no smooth diplomats, no double-talking bureaucrats. Delegates are mostly rural folk from "the sticks," many of whom sat in a plane for the first time to get here.

For 18 of the Canadians, it's their first visit outside of North America; for some, their first outside of their province.

For dozens of Asians and Africans, Delhi — capital of impoverished India — is proving too urban, its hotel escalators too sophisticated to negotiate. The contraptions are causing traffic tie-ups between floors at the convention centre where the gathering is being held.

The delegates constitute the first effective non-Communist coalition to tackle poverty.

The institute's leaders are a Who's Who of the capitalist world and include Senator Hartland Molson of Canada. Its staff of 1,200 consists of management experts who believe throwing foreign-aid money at problems won't solve anything if grass-roots motivation is lacking.

A total of 161 projects are represented here, mini-success stories of local initiatives in partnership with the private sector and governments. Some of Canada's delegates and the projects they represent:

□ Commandant's band pulled itself out of abject poverty by converting 9½ hectares (27 acres) of wild Muskoka marsh into the largest commercial cranberry plantation in Ontario, with a yearly yield of 271,000 kilograms (600,000 pounds).

□ Ken Morin of southern Georgian Bay would have loved to fly his fresh, hydroponic (grown in a nutrient solution) lettuce half way around the globe to show off here.

His Metis and Non-Status Indian Association in Port McNicoll is selling 2,500 heads of pesticide-free lettuce in the Midland area, edging out California imports.

□ Barbara Gallant won many admirers here talking about her work and her home town — Tignish,

P.E.I., the Co-op capital of the Maritimes.

Her umbrella group of 11 co-operatives has changed the inaccessible, poverty-stricken fishing village on the Gulf of St. Lawrence into a thriving community of 1,000 that runs everything the Co-op way

□ Kines of the Red Brigades is a Prairie native who returned home in 1977 after working for the United Nations in New York city and Nairobi.

Wanting to "return thought control to the people from media moguls," he helped secure a licence from the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission for a cable TV co-operative.

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The organization now serves 200,000 people in 125 western Manitoba towns and villages scattered over 80,000 square kilometres.

□ Harry Cook of the 3,000-member La Ronge Band, 240 kilometres (150 miles) north of Prince Albert, believes Canadian natives can beat deprivation and alcoholism in urban centres and move back to their roots — as he did.

After living in Regina for 13 years, he returned to "my own environment," where he has helped to build 72 homes and create job opportunities in six communities.

□ George Arcand, 25, of the Alexander Reserve, 20 kilometres (12 miles) north of Edmonton, tells Australian aborigines he's "once again proud to be Indian."

"It wasn't too cool to be Indian not long ago in Canada. But now it's okay."

As vice-chairman of his reserve's school board, he has helped to teach Indian history, culture and language. The strap has been put away. The student dropout rate has fallen to 5 per cent from 85 per cent.

□ Lorna Ferguson travels 8,000 kilometres (4,800 miles) a month in northern Alberta teaching Indian adults how to read and write.

She's proving a hit with Third World delegates here.