Inuit get federal apology for forced relocation

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The Canadian government says it regrets the "mistakes and broken promises" it made in forcing some Inuit to relocate to the High Arctic in the 1950s.

Indian and Northern Affairs Minister John Duncan issued a formal apology Wednesday for the government's controversial High Arctic relocation program, in which 87 Inuit were relocated about 1,200 kilometres to Canada's most northerly settlements.

The Inuit from Inukjuak, a community in northern Quebec, were moved to Grise Fiord and Resolute, in what is now Nunavut, in 1953 and 1956.

Another three families from Pond Inlet, Nunavut, were also moved north to help the Inukjuak families adjust to their new environment.

But Duncan said the transplanted families — commonly dubbed the "High Arctic Exiles" — did not get what the government of the day had promised them.

"We're apologizing for promises that were made and not kept," Duncan told reporters.

"They were promised they were going to a more abundant place. They were promised that they would remain in one community. They were promised that they could leave and return to their home communities after two years if they were unhappy. So, those were significant promises."

Unfamiliar conditions

The relocated Inuit also had to cope with unfamiliar conditions and little government support.

They were taken from the relatively lush tundra of northern Quebec to the High Arctic, where they found a much colder climate, unfamiliar terrain, constant winter darkness and limited varieties of wildlife that they could hunt.

The government has acknowledged that due to poor planning, the relocated families spent their first winter in tents with not enough food and supplies.

"They were not provided with adequate shelter and supplies. They were not properly informed of how far away and how different from Inukjuak their new homes would be, and they were not aware that they would be separated into two communities once they arrived in the High Arctic," Duncan's apology stated in part.

"Moreover, the government failed to act on its promise to return anyone that did not wish to stay in the High Arctic to their old homes."

Vibrant communities' built
The federal government had insisted that they were trying to help the affected Inuit, who were having trouble surviving as subsistence hunters in northern Quebec.

However, many have argued that the Inuit were used to assert Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic during the Cold War.

The communities of Resolute and Grise Fiord still exist. The hamlets have populations of 229 and 141, respectively, according to Statistics Canada.

"Despite the suffering and hardship, the relocatees and their descendants were successful in building vibrant communities in Grise Fiord and Resolute Bay," Duncan said.

"The government of Canada recognizes that these communities have contributed to a strong Canadian presence in the High Arctic."

In 1996, the federal government agreed to pay $10 million into a trust fund to compensate the families of the relocated people.

'Start healing from our wounds'

Duncan said those who received the apology in Inukjuak expressed thanks for it.

Mayor Sarollie Weetaluktuk told CBC News the apology marks a historic milestone not just for those who had to move, but also for their descendents and other Inuit.

"It's finally done, the apology has been made. We saw with our own eyes today," Weetaluktuk said in Inuktitut.

"We want to start healing from our wounds and it will [happen] — I know not just for the Inuit here in Inukjuak, but for those who live elsewhere and their descendants too. They will share their stories now. I think it will help us all."

Pita Aatami, president of the Quebec Inuit land-claim organization Makivik Corp., told CBC News he was happy to finally hear an apology from the government.

Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., the Inuit land-claims organization in Nunavut, has commissioned two monuments to commemorate the sacrifices the "High Arctic Exiles" made in Grise Fiord and Resolute.

The stone monuments, one in each community, are slated to be unveiled next month. Duncan said he will attend the unveiling ceremonies in those communities.