

Story #1 Earthquakes

In the last two weeks, earthquakes hit two different countries: Ecuador and Japan.

The earth shook in Ecuador on Saturday, April 16th. It was Ecuador's biggest earthquake in decades, with the number of dead more than 500, including 4 Canadians. At least 4,000 people were injured. Rescue workers continue to hunt through the rubble for survivors in the coastal towns.

The 7.8 magnitude quake struck off the Pacific coast, but was felt all around the small South American country.

The Ecuador quake came after two large and deadly quakes that struck Japan.

On the southern island of Kyushu, a 7.1 magnitude quake struck on Friday April 15th, killing at least 45 people, injuring more than a thousand, and causing widespread damage to houses, roads and bridges. More than 150,000 people were forced into evacuation shelters. This is an important manufacturing area, where they make cars.

Both Japan and Ecuador are located on the "Ring of Fire" that circles the Pacific Ocean, where earthquakes are very common. Scientists don't know if these quakes are connected.

Story #2 A Change in Leader

Tom Mulcair was the leader of the federal New Democratic Party, or NDP, in the 2015 federal election. But a couple of weeks ago, members of the NDP gathered in Edmonton, Alberta, for the party's convention, or annual meeting. The NDP members, who are called 'delegates' at the convention, were asked if they wanted to choose a new leader and they voted "yes."

The vote was very close. Just 52% of the delegates voted for a leadership election. Forty-eight percent voted "no" because they were happy with Tom Mulcair as their leader.

Why did the NDP delegates want to change their leader? Ever since last fall's election, when the NDP fell to third place in the House of Commons, people have questioned whether or not Tom Mulcair can provide good leadership. In the federal election, the NDP dropped from 109 seats in parliament to only 44 seats. It was a major defeat.

Tom Mulcair will stay on as leader until the new leader is chosen – in a separate vote sometime in the next two years. Mulcair was the NDP leader for just over four years. He was hoping for a vote of 70% in favour of him staying leader, but the delegates wanted a change.

Story #3 Aboriginal Communities in Crisis

In Ontario, there is a continuing crisis in two small northern First Nations villages.

Indigenous and Northern Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett visited Attawapiskat, the Cree community. Attawapiskat is spelled A-T-T-A-W-A-P-I-S-K-A-T. This village recently declared a state of emergency after there were 11 suicide attempts in one day. A nearby aboriginal village, Neskantaga, has also had unusually high rates of suicide.

What are the causes of these tragedies? First, the housing conditions are very poor in these remote villages. There is overcrowding and sometimes five families live in a single house. The housing situation means very few young people have their own homes.

Second, in one village, the water is not safe to drink, so they must boil all the water they drink. People in the community have been without safe tap water for 22 years. Even when residents take a bath in this water, it can cause skin problems and sometimes blisters.

The third reason is the general economy of the villages – many people are poor. The Northern Affairs minister agreed that “poverty promotes despair,” which means poverty creates a cycle of unhappiness and depression. One resident said, “The suicides, the water, the housing — everything is connected.”

Story #4 Public School Cutbacks

School boards around the province are facing at least \$56 million in budget cuts and may have to eliminate more than 350 jobs next September.

The Vancouver school district faces a \$12-million shortfall, which could mean the loss of 70 full-time positions. Controversial decisions will need to be made, like cutting elementary school band or cutting the athletic coordinator. Next year could be even more challenging because Vancouver schools are already facing a \$26.6-million shortfall for the current 2015-16 school year.

Schools districts are funded by the province on a per-pupil basis. This means that if you have more students, your school gets more money. In Vancouver, there has been declining enrolment – fewer students. However, some districts, like Central Okanagan and Delta, are facing budget cuts despite the fact that enrolment will probably increase.

Budget cuts are necessary in many areas because the overall provincial budget for education has not increased.

Vancouver school board chairwoman Patti Bacchus said she does not support any of the suggested cuts and said the trustees will have to make “impossible” decisions.

Vancouver’s proposal to cut elementary school band programs is already facing strong opposition. Opponents argue that playing music in school provides an opportunity that cannot be replaced by any other kind of instruction. These benefits include self-expression and non-verbal communication. Many districts plan to approve their budgets by April 30.