

'Kanesatake is actually really peaceful'

Leave community alone: resident. Local store clerk blames trouble-making kids for ramming police cars, setting up blockade

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Although the facts surrounding the 10-hour fiery blockade of Highway 344 in Kanesatake remain murky, stories circulating in the Mohawk community yesterday pieced together a possible series of events.

Early Friday evening, Sûreté du Québec officers stopped a car with two minors and one adult. The 17-year-old driver did not have a driver's license and was taken into custody along with one of the passengers.

According to a community member who works at a store on Highway 344, police used force against one of the detained.

The two members of the Mohawk community were later released, but two Sûreté du Québec patrol cars were reportedly rammed and severely damaged by Mohawk vehicles while leaving the community, though police officers were not injured.

Once the SQ left Kanesatake just after midnight, about a dozen people set up a barricade of burning tree trunks to prevent the police from re-entering the community.

"They're just a bunch of kids causing trouble," said the store clerk, who declined to give her name. "To me, they were just showing off, but the point is we have our own peacekeepers here on the territory. We want to be left alone."

The clerk said media focus too much on a few bad apples in the community, giving Kanesatake a violent reputation.

"People should never judge a book by its cover. It's gorgeous out here, that's why we like it, it's actually really peaceful."

Leaders of the Kanesatake community could not be reached for comment during the weekend, including newly elected Grand Chief Sohenrise Paul Nicholas.

At the request of the Sûreté du Québec, band council members were sent to the scene of the barricade early Saturday morning to negotiate with the dozen or so Mohawks.

The band council members reportedly calmed the protesters and, shortly after 3 a.m., they agreed to go home.

Transport Quebec officials arrived at about 7 a.m. to clear the highway, which was reopened to traffic at around 10 a.m.

The Sûreté du Québec was tight-lipped about the incident.

"We have begun an investigation," said SQ spokesperson Sgt. Michel Brunet. "We're keeping all the details of the inquiry to ourselves. We'll take the necessary time.

"Often, this can take days or it can take weeks," he said, refusing to make any predictions.

"At this point, there have been no charges (laid against any individuals). We have to validate all the information, meet all the witnesses," Brunet said.

The SQ would not provide any damage estimate for two patrol cars that were rammed nor confirm how many vehicles were involved in each of the rammings.

Both SQ squad cars sustained heavy damage, Brunet said, but he would not confirm that the two cars would have to be written off.

"We'll know that at the start of this week, probably," Brunet said.

The four constables inside the two vehicles that were rammed were not injured.

However, Brunet said that the arrests Friday evening "had nothing to do with the barricade and all that."

SQ Sgt. Gregory Gomez del Prado acknowledged that there has been an increased police presence in Kanesatake in recent weeks.

Many community members are uncomfortable with the SQ presence in their community, the store clerk said.

"We don't want the SQ to tell us what to do," she said. "This is our place; it's our community. We want to be able to govern and police ourselves."

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