

Canada to Give Indigenous People An Arctic Area the Size of Texas

By [John F. Burns](#), [Special To the New York Times](#) Sept. 6, 1988



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Canada passed a major milestone today on the way to a long-delayed land settlement with its indigenous people. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney signed an agreement that will give 39,000 Indians, Eskimos and people of mixed ancestry living along the boundaries of the Arctic Ocean ownership of an area the size of Texas.

The agreement, signed today at Fort Rae, in the Northwest Territories, was part of what has been described as the biggest land transaction since the Alaska and Louisiana purchases in the 19th century.

In all, the nonwhite people living in Canada's north are expected to gain title to 260,000 square miles, about 7 percent of the land area of Canada, the largest country in the world after the Soviet Union. Voice in Development

The agreements would give the nonwhites a strong voice in the development of another 1.1 million square miles in northern Canada, nearly 30 percent of the country's total area of 3.8 million square miles. The accord would cede control of the land for "traditional" activities like hunting

and trapping.

Nonwhites will have a major role in setting the terms for mineral development, including the search for oil and gas.

As a crowd of 500 Indians swayed to the beat of drums, Mr. Mulroney described today's agreement as the start of a new era in relations between Canada's majority population and its nonwhite minority, which makes up 500,000 of the country's 25.5 million people.

"Decades from now, Canadians generally and northerners in particular will point with pride to this event today as one that contributed to the evolution of Canada as a land of fairness and justice," Mr. Mulroney said. Plagues of Troubles

Among nonwhites, the settlement of the land issue is regarded as a landmark in the battle against the troubling levels of alcoholism, broken families and illiteracy that have plagued the Indians in the north.

"Once we have our own land, we can make a start on regaining the dignity of our peoples," said Stephen Kakfwi, one of the Indian leaders who pushed the hardest for today's agreement.

The agreements will have a far-reaching effect on the Canadian north, an area that has a major influence on the country's national character, including its art, literature and poetry. But the complicated and drawn-out deal between Ottawa and the nonwhites has attracted only passing attention in the southern parts of the country, where more than 90 percent of Canadians live.

Negotiations leading to the land settlements have dragged on for more than a decade. They began after the nonwhites won a series of court rulings that

led the Government of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau to discuss granting large chunks of Canada to the Indians and Eskimos. Huge Tract for Indians

The deal signed by Mr. Mulroney involves 13,000 Indians and people of mixed Indian and European ancestry who live in an area stretching from the northern boundaries of Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia to the Arctic Ocean.

Although details remain to be worked out, the agreement granted the Indians and other nonwhites title to more than 70,000 square miles of land and a cash settlement over 20 years of more than \$400 million.

Under an accord concluded earlier this summer, the 6,500 Indians in the Yukon will gain title to nearly 16,000 square miles of land and receive a cash settlement of nearly \$200 million.

This follows a deal made in 1984, when 35,000 square miles of land and \$150 million in cash went to 2,500 Eskimos living along the rim of the Arctic Ocean, where the borders of the Northwest Territories and the Yukon meet. Large Eskimo Deal

The largest deal of all, still being negotiated, is expected next spring. That will settle the claims of 17,000 Eskimos who live elsewhere in the Northwest Territories, in the vast terrain that includes almost all of Canada's Arctic islands. As sketched out by officials who have been conducting the talks, that deal would grant the Eskimos 136,000 square miles of territory and \$525 million in cash.

The land settlements have run parallel to other talks in which Government officials are trying to settle land claims by Indian groups in the southern part of the country, mainly in Alberta and British Columbia. But the amount of

land at stake in those talks, while substantial, is far smaller than the area being granted to the nonwhites in the north.

There has been much bitterness surrounding the effort to settle the northern claims. Many whites in the Northwest Territories, who slightly outnumber the nonwhites as a percentage of the overall population, oppose any special privileges for the indigenous people. A Push for More? And some nonwhites, including William Erasmus, president of the Assembly of First Nations, an umbrella group representing the country's Indians and people of mixed race, have vowed to use the talks on fixing the details of the settlements, including the exact areas to which the nonwhites would gain title, to push for still larger areas of land.

Negotiations will continue on unresolved issues, including the demand by the indigenous people for an end to the stewardship exercised by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and the establishment of full rights of self-government for nonwhite groups.

It is unclear how these demands will be reconciled with another long-term vision in the north, the granting of provincial status to the Yukon and Northwest Territories, which are under the control of Ottawa.