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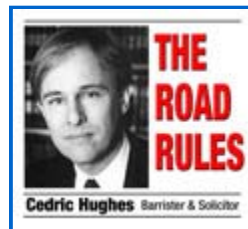
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Gov't urged to speed up process

Paul J. Henderson, The Times

Published: Tuesday, November 20, 2007

Indian Affairs Minister and local MP Chuck Strahl has flatly denied media reports millions of dollars had been taken from the Indian Residential School Settlement Trust to pay for cost overruns elsewhere.

"The article . . . implies that money is being taken from the residential schools programming to fund another program," Strahl and Minister of Human Resources and Social Development Monte Solberg said in a letter sent to the Times. "That is completely false."

The Nov. 15 Montreal Gazette reported that \$82.6 million from the trust money was taken to pay for cost overruns in the government's summer jobs program, but this is simply not true, according to Strahl.

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"In fact, the \$82 million that was cited in the article has already been sent out to elderly residential school students in a special advance payment," said the Strahl and Solberg letter.

"The total of the \$1.9 billion that was set aside for the common experience payment for residential schools students is available to them," Strahl told the House of Commons. "It is being processed and the money is being delivered as we speak. Eligible students are getting their money."

To date, the Department of Indian Affairs has received more than 74,000 applications and issued close to 9,000 payments totaling \$181.7 million.

There have been criticisms from First Nations leaders over delays in processing the funds as many are elderly, and the funds will not be available to their heirs.

However, a ministry spokesperson told the Gazette that they are making moves to speed things up.

"Both Indian Residential School Resolution Canada and Service Canada have put in place measures to manage the large volumes of applications," said spokesperson Martin Rivard. "We have hired more staff and are working overtime to ensure that we can continue to respond to applicants in a timely fashion."

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