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Manitoba Liberal MP Tina Keeper asks the traditional first question reserved for the Opposition leader during question period in Ottawa on Tuesday June 10, 2008. (Tom Hanson / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

PM faces criticism on eve of native schools apology

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CTV.ca News Staff

On the eve of his historic apology to survivors of residential school abuse, the prime minister is fending off criticism for failing to give aboriginal leaders the chance to respond on the House of Commons floor.

Manitoba Liberal MP Tina Keeper, a member of Norway House Cree Nation, led off question period on Tuesday by asking why aboriginal leaders have not been invited to address



Residential school students appear in this undated file photo.

Parliament following Wednesday's apology.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper responded by accusing Keeper of detracting from the importance of the event with her comments.

"I would urge all parties not to play politics with this (and) simply get behind a sincere apology," he said.

Indian and Northern Affairs minister Chuck Strahl has vowed Harper will deliver a speech that takes responsibility for the abuse many aboriginal children suffered at the hands of those running the mandatory schools, which operated for a century, ending in the 1970s.

About 150,000 native children went through the programs, which were an extension of religious missionary work designed to assimilate the children into Christian society.

Strahl told reporters on Monday that Harper would deliver a lengthy apology that acknowledges the numerous types of abuse that took place at the schools, including elimination of native languages and culture. He said the speech would clearly explain why the government is remorseful.

- *CTV Newsnet will have a live broadcast of the apology, expected around 3 p.m. ET*

School survivor Michael Cachagee, president of the National Residential School Survivors' Society, said Tuesday that he doesn't think it's possible to adequately say sorry for all of the horrible things that happened in the schools.

However, many others in his community were eager for the apology, he said, even though it is bound to bring up bad memories for the victims.

"Just the anticipation of coming to Ottawa... a whole bunch of thoughts ran through my mind, back to my childhood," he said on CTV's Mike Duffy Live. "I had a hard time sleeping last night."

Many communities across Canada are holding events where they will watch Harper's speech with grief counsellors on hand. Health Canada is also providing counsellors for those gathered on Parliament Hill.

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At the end of 2006, about 80,000 members of a residential schools class action lawsuit settled with the government for \$5 billion. The settlement included individual payments that varied depending how long a student was in the residential system.

Cachagee is one of 10,000 survivors who are contesting their payouts because they weren't paid for all the years they spent in the schools. After submitting a claim for the 13 years he spent in the schools, beginning at age four, he was dismayed to receive only \$36,000 -- \$12,000 less than he claimed.

With files from The Canadian Press



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