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Residential schools 'a sad chapter in our history,' Harper tells First Nations

'Sad chapter in our history'

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Chris Wattie/Reuters

Prime Minister Stephen Harper shakes hands with Assembly of First Nations Chief Phil Fontaine. Harper delivered a historic apology on Canada's residential schools policy.

OTTAWA -- Canada's historic apology to residential school survivors is underway in the House of Commons and aboriginal leaders and former students are watching closely in the hopes the prime minister's words signal an era of healing and reconciliation.

"I stand before you today to offer an apology to former students of Indian residential schools. The treatment of

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children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history," Prime Minister Stephen Harper said as he began his speech.

Mr. Harper said residential schools aimed to isolate and remove children from the influence of their homes and assimilate them.

"Today we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country," he said.

Many students were abused at the schools, including the current leader of the Assembly of First Nations, Phil Fontaine. He participated in a traditional smudging ceremony in the foyer of the House of Commons where saged smoke was burned to clear away negative spirits before he entered the Commons to hear the apology.

The sounds of pounding drums and chanters echoed through the halls of Parliament Hill where hundreds of people lined up to sit in the public galleries of the Commons.

While several churches have apologized for their roles in residential schools, Wednesday marks the first official apology from the federal government.

It comes after the establishment of a five-year Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission -- part of a \$2-billion settlement reached in 2006 among the government, churches and about 90,000 former students.

Liberal Leader Stephane Dion said: "Today, we representatives of the Canadian people, apologize to those who survived residential schools and to those who died as a result of the laws enacted by previous Parliaments. And by speaking directly to survivors and victims today on the floor of the House of Commons, we apologize to those who died waiting for these words to be spoken and these wrongs acknowledged."

About 150,000 children were taken from their families and forced to attend the state-funded, church-run schools that aimed to remove aboriginal language and culture from several generations of children.

Mr. Harper acknowledged many students were inadequately fed, clothed and housed and "deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents and communities."

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"Tragically, some of these children died while attending residential schools and others never returned home," the prime minister said.

He expressed regret that they are not here to receive the apology.

Mr. Harper said some former students have spoken positively about their experiences at residential schools, but that their stories are overshadowed by stories of those who suffered emotional, sexual and physical abuse.

The legacy of the schools has contributed to social problems that exist today in aboriginal communities, the prime minister said, and that the absence of an apology has impeded reconciliation.

"Therefore on behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to Aboriginal Peoples for Canada's role in the Indian residential schools system," he said.

"The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal Peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly. We are sorry."

The apology began at 3:15 p.m. and seated on the floor of the House of Commons to hear it were Fontaine, Inuit leader Mary Simon, Metis leader Clem Chartier, Patrick Brazeau, national chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, and other native leaders.

Several former students also had front-row seats on the floor of the Commons, which cancelled all official business Wednesday to focus on the apology, including Marguerite Wabano, the oldest known living survivor of the schools.

The 104 year old made the trip to Ottawa from her home in Moosonee, Ont.

"It is a grand day for me, it is a very special day for me to be here and to see what is going to happen today and I feel very thankful I was one of the members to be here," she said earlier in the day through a Cree-speaking translator. "I have been very well received since I have been here, since I arrived in Ottawa and I am very happy to be on Parliament Hill where the prime minister actually works."

Hours before the historic apology, aboriginal leaders expressed a sense of hope that it will set the stage for an era of healing.

"We're grabbing onto some hope that it will be a moment that will lead to a better tomorrow, that the general populace is finally going to be made aware of those severely disruptive policies over generations," said Shawn Atleo, B.C. Assembly of First Nations regional chief, in an interview.

After Mr. Harper's speech, opposition leaders will make statements which will then be followed by a ceremony, outside the Commons, where the apology will be signed by Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl and the prime minister.

Mr. Strahl will address the guests and leaders of aboriginal groups will also make remarks.

Events are being held across the country to mark the historic day and in Ottawa, activities began at the break of dawn on Victoria Island where a sacred fire was lit.

In anticipation of the emotional day for former students and their families, the Assembly of First Nations had health-support workers on hand on Parliament Hill and has a toll-free distress line that is staffed 24-hours a day.

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