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Native Canadians at a residential school in Fort Resolution, in the Northwest Territories, in a picture from around 1936. The residential schools were poorly run and inadequately financed. (Library and Archives Canada)

Canada apologizes to its Indians

By Ian Austen

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OTTAWA: The government of Canada has formally apologized to native Canadians for forcing about 150,000 native children into government-financed residential schools where many suffered physical and sexual abuse.

The system of schools, which began shutting down in the 1970s after decades of operations, was dedicated to eradicating the languages, traditions and cultural practices of native Canadians and has been linked to the widespread incidence of alcoholism, suicide and family violence in many native communities.

"The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history," Stephen Harper, the prime minister of Canada, said in a speech Wednesday in the House of Commons. "Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm and has no place in our country."

An apology from the prime minister had been sought by native groups for years and was part of a broad, court-sanctioned settlement with the government and the church organizations that operated most of the schools.

The federal government also agreed to pay 1.9 billion Canadian dollars, or \$1.86 billion, to surviving students and to establish a truth and reconciliation commission to document the experiences of children who attended the schools.

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Harry LaForme, a Mississauga Indian and a justice of the Ontario Court of Appeal who will oversee the commission, said the schools program was responsible for making the relationship between native people and other Canadians "so unworkable, so filled with mistrust."

"The policy of the Canadian residential schools wasn't to educate Indian children," he said in an interview. "It was to kill the Indian in the child, it was to erase the culture of Indian people from the fabric of Canada."

In a rare break with parliamentary tradition, several native leaders were allowed to speak from the floor of the House of Commons.

Some spoke in their native languages. All praised Harper for offering the apology, though native groups remain at odds with the government on several issues, including spending on native communities.

"The memories of residential schools sometimes cut like merciless knives at our souls," Phil Fontaine, the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, the national association of native groups, told the House of Commons. He wore a ceremonial feathered head dress.

"Never again will this House consider us 'the Indian problem' just for being who we are," he said.

In 1990, Fontaine, an Ojibway, became one of the first native leaders to disclose that he had been sexually abused while attending the Fort Alexander Indian Residential School in Manitoba.

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The government has acknowledged that sexual and physical abuse in the schools was widespread.

Attendance at residential schools was made mandatory by the government in 1920 for native children between the ages of 7 and 16 as part of a program it called "aggressive assimilation." Children were forced to leave their parents and were harshly punished for speaking their own languages or practicing their religions.

Harper and many fellow members of the Conservative Party initially resisted offering an apology, suggesting that it would be applying current cultural values to the past. Fontaine said in an interview that he believed that Harper had changed his mind after the government of Australia formally apologized to its aboriginal people this year for its policy of forced assimilation.

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