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Friday, 13 June 2008

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Canadian Government apologies for Residential Schools

Stephen Harper, Canada's Prime Minister, apologized on behalf of the Canadian Government for its role in the Indian Residential School System in front of Aboriginal Leaders, elders, and more than 1000 outside the Parliament Building.

Harper proclaimed, "The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history. Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country." This apology was seen at more than 30 event around the country, and broadcast live on CBC Newsworld and CTV Newsnet.

The residential school system was created based on the Gradual Civilization Act (1857) and the Gradual Enfranchisement Act (1869), which assumed the superiority of British Ways, prompting the need for Aboriginals to become "civilized" by becoming English-speakers, Christians, and farmers. The funding of the schools was provided by the Indian Act (1876) and by the federal government department, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, and operated with the support of churches, generally the Roman Catholic Church and the United Church of Canada.

In the 1920s, attendance became compulsory for all children aged 6 to 15, and families who refused to cooperate were at risk of having the children removed by the government, and the parents sent to prison. The school systematically tried to destroy the aboriginal language and way of life, raising the idea of cultural genocide. Students were forbidden to speak their native languages, even outside the classroom, as to install the English or French language (and as result, to "forget" their native language), punishable by unreasonably severe corporal punishment. Practicing non-Christian faiths was also punishable by corporal punishment.

In the late 1990s, allegations of sexual abuse, as well as several physical and psychological abuse, arose, leading to large monetary payments from the federal government and churches to former students. The government also established the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, providing \$350 million to fund community-based healing projects, and provided another \$40 million in 2005.

On February 13, 2008, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a similar apology in the Australian House of Parliament.

On June 21, 2008, Indian Residential School Museum of Canada is scheduled to open on Long Plain First Nation, near Portage La Prairie, Manitoba.

Sources

- "Harper apologizes for residential school abuse". *CTV*, Wed. Jun. 11 2008
- "PM cites 'sad chapter' in apology for residential schools". *CBC*, Wednesday, June 11, 2008
- http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Canadian_Government_apologises_for_Residential_Schools

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