

Federal apology will ring hollow: Labrador Inuit

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Inuit in Labrador say the formal apology expected Wednesday afternoon in the House of Commons will leave them feeling unsatisfied.

Although three members of the Nunatsiavut government will attend Parliament to hear Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology in person, Labrador Inuit were not formally invited to the historic event.

A boarding school in North West River, in central Labrador, has not been recognized by Ottawa as a residential school, because it was not operated by the Canadian government.

"We're probably not feeling the same as the other people. The apology is not intended for us," Nora Ford said in Happy Valley-Goose Bay Tuesday, as she prepared to board a flight to Ottawa.

She said her experiences — and those of many others — at the North West River school mirrors what former students have described at residential schools. Nunatsiavut is appealing to the federal government to reconsider the designation.

"I spent 10 years of my life [there] and it was a horrible ordeal," Ford said.

"I went through all kinds of physical abuse. I was thrown down stairs. There was kerosene poured over my head to kill lice that I never had."

Jim Nitsman, a resident of Hopedale who also spent several years living at the North West River boarding school, hopes Nunatsiavut's presence in the House of Commons has an impact.

"At least they'll be aware of it, I'll be aware of it," he said. "There won't be closure, though — half, maybe."

Meanwhile, Canada's national Inuit organization has committed itself to helping Labrador Inuit obtain recognition and a settlement.

Mary Simon, president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, said she is inviting a Nunatsiavut representative to attend a meeting her organization will have with Harper Wednesday in Ottawa, before the public apology.

"It's totally not right to exclude the Inuit from Labrador, because they went through the same thing as the residential school survivors," Simon told CBC News.

"So we've invited one of the Labrador representatives to be with us when we meet with the prime minister. I'm hoping that'll provide an opportunity to express their view."

Nunatsiavut came into being in 2005, following a three-decade-long land claims negotiation. It covers 72,520 square kilometres of northern Labrador, and made the Inuit sole owners of 15,800 square kilometres of that land.

The Nunatsiavut assembly co-manages the rest of the land.

During an emotional ceremony in 2005, Newfoundland and Labrador Premier Danny Williams apologized to Labrador's 5,000 Inuit for the forced resettlement of two Inuit communities during the 1950s.