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Truth and reconciliation commission on hold

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Northern News Services

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SOMBA K'E/YELLOWKNIFE - Justice Harry S. LaForme has resigned as chair of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission fewer than five months after being appointed.

LaForme said his decision to resign came after the other two commissioners failed to recognize his authority as chair.

Last Thursday the Globe and Mail quoted commission counsel Owen Young as saying the dispute was about the focus of the commission. LaForme wanted to focus on reconciliation while commissioners Claudette Dumont-Smith and Jane Brewin Morley wanted to hear survivors' stories.

The mandate of the commission is to carry out both of those goals.

The commission released a statement on behalf of commissioners Dumont-Smith and Morley saying they are "disappointed and saddened" to hear of LaForme's decision to resign.

"It is unfortunate that we had not met as a commission since Aug. 26. Had we met more often I am sure that we could have worked through any issues we were facing," said Dumont-Smith.

This new hold-up of the commission is not sitting well with aboriginal leaders around the NWT. Chief Frank T'seleie in Fort Good Hope said the commission needs to get on with its work without delay.

"Our community here has been subject to (the schools) for well over a hundred years and at some point in time the story has to be told," he said.

Tlcho government Grand Chief George Mackenzie said the elders in his community need to have their stories heard before it is too late.

"It is not only healing for the elders themselves but their families and their communities as a whole," said Mackenzie.

He said a replacement needs to be found right away so the commission can get back to work.

Dene National Chief Bill Erasmus also said the need to find a replacement soon.

"We cannot prolong this any longer. We have to get on with it for the sake of our peoples who suffered so greatly," he said.

One person being named as a possible replacement is NWT resident Georges Erasmus. Erasmus served as president of the Dene Nation in the 1970s during the time of the Berger Inquiry.

He was elected chief of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) in 1985 and held the position until 1991.

During that time he turned the AFN from a fractured, debt-ridden organization into a united and powerful voice for all Canadian First Nations people.

Erasmus also co-chaired the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and is an Officer of the Order of Canada.

Erasmus could not be reached for comment.

Mackenzie said Erasmus would be an excellent candidate for the job.

"I would definitely support Georges Erasmus because we've known him for a long time and he is a very, very good listener," said Mackenzie.

