



Katherine Fogden/NMAI

Leaders meet to discuss reconciliation

By Rob Capriccioso
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WASHINGTON – Indigenous leaders from North and Central America recently gathered to discuss the significance of governmental apologies involving historical injustices committed upon Natives.

The summit included tribal and Indian leaders from the United States, Canada and Guatemala who spoke at the National Museum of the American Indian Nov. 13.

Tim Johnson, director of programs at the museum, said it was in the spirit of Thanksgiving to discuss timely issues surrounding reconciliation and “to highlight national apologies made to Native peoples.” He said the event was an effort to educate society more deeply about the American Indian experience and “to identify mutual aspirations and opportunities for reconciliation.”

Caroline Davis, assistant deputy minister of Indian affairs from Canada and Phil Fontaine, a national chief with the Assembly of First Nations, were part of a panel of leaders who spoke at a symposium on reconciliation at the National Museum of the American Indian.

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One of the main questions of the day, mentioned by Kevin Gover, director of NMAI, focused on what conditions can end up leading to national apologies to indigenous peoples or other peoples who have been oppressed. He noted that the U.S. offered an apology to Native Hawaiians for the overthrow of the kingdom of Hawaii and an apology and composition for Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II.

“And yet, there still seems to be some difficulty in our national politics about offering apologies to Native Americans [and] to African Americans for slavery,” Gover said.

Gover added that the pace of apologies to indigenous peoples worldwide has seemed to increase in recent years, especially in Australia and Canada.

A large portion of the program focused on the June 11, 2008 apology by the Canadian government for the abuse and cultural loss suffered by indigenous people in the country’s residential schools.

Similar to the experiences of many American Indians, several First Nations’ students were historically removed from their homes and families in an effort to rid them of their culture and language. The last federally-run residential school ceased operation in 1996. It’s estimated that there are 80,000 First Nations’ members alive today who attended a residential school.

Caroline Davis, an assistant deputy minister of Indian affairs from Canada, explained that the apology was over a decade in the making, and resulted from previously botched attempts by the government to work with First Nations’ members to make amends. She called the Canadian development “an ongoing effort toward healing and reconciliation.”

She noted that in the 1990s her country created a commission to explore the relationship of indigenous people with the Canadian government, and established the Aboriginal Healing Foundation to provide funding to those abused in the schools.

The Canadian government also issued an initial apology in the 1990s, but many indigenous folks felt it did not go far enough, and they did not feel that it created appropriate pathways for financial compensation.

Class action lawsuits ultimately saw the government decide to offer a stronger apology, and to take more financial responsibility. Thousands of lump sum payments have now been made, and financial compensation is based on the severity of abuse individuals suffered in the schools. Money has also been set aside to provide counseling and other emotional support to survivors of sexual, physical and other

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Beyond monetary compensation, Davis said the government felt that an official strong apology, suitable to indigenous peoples, was necessary for reconciliation to fully occur.

Phil Fontaine, a national chief with the Assembly of First Nations, said at the event that he perceives the apology, which was offered by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, as a promise from Canada to "right the wrongs of the past" and to "help create a new beginning."

"But an apology must be more than symbolic," Fontaine continued, saying that the effects of the residential school experience has set back many First Nations' people in terms of education and health. He said they need much more assistance and attention from the government to help make up for the problems.

"Reconciliation must restore our original relationship with Canada – a partnership based on mutual recognition and respect."

A stark contrast between Canada's approach to reconciliation to that of the United States was apparent when the discussion next turned to the Native American Apology Resolution recently passed this year by the U.S. Senate.

The resolution acknowledges "a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the United States Government regarding Indian tribes" and offers "an apology to all Native peoples on behalf of the United States."

The House has not acted on similar legislation to date, so the bill has made little progress since its initial advancement.

Former Republican Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, of Northern Cheyenne descent, said that when he served in Congress, many of his peers told him they were concerned that financial payments to Indians would become necessary if the U.S. government offered a formal apology.

The Colorado politician also noted that the apology resolution passed in the Senate was attached to the reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act this session, which several House leaders did not support due to a pro-life amendment attached to the legislation.

"I can say right from the start that I wish every member of the United States' House and Senate could have heard the presentations of [Davis and Fontaine]," Nighthorse Campbell said.

"It's very clear to me that the nation of Canada is way ahead of us from the standpoint of recognizing the past injustices and things we need to do to become whole again."

Nighthorse Campbell said that some Congress members, like Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., who sponsored the apology in the Senate, recognize the importance of an apology.

The former senator also said a symbolic apology, sans financial compensation, "might not put food on the table," but it could help bind people together.

Victor Montejo, a member of the Guatemalan National Congress, next spoke about the difficulties of the indigenous people of the Latin American country in achieving reconciliation.

Of Jakalteq Mayan descent, Montejo said that some indigenous people there are still looking for an apology, although many of the harmful effects of colonization took place long ago. He believes, too, that reconciliation should be accompanied by reparations, agreeing with Canada's approach over that of the U.S.

After the presenters from the individual countries spoke, Gabrielle Tayac, a historian with the NMAI, noted that several Native cultures give great credence to the concept of apology accompanied with action.

"It is certainly quite apparent that in 2008, another world is possible," Tayac said.

Many American Indians in attendance at the summit expressed hope that President-elect Barack Obama will lead the way in finalizing an apology in the U.S. To date, Obama has not expressed a firm timeline for doing so.

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