

THE CANADIAN PRESS

Protesters demand PM, churches reveal fates of residential school children

1 day ago

TORONTO - Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the heads of Canada's Anglican, Catholic and United churches were put on notice Friday that protesters won't rest until everything is known about the tens of thousands of aboriginal children who disappeared from residential schools.

Filmmaker Kevin Annett, who produced a documentary called "Hidden From History: The Canadian Holocaust," was among a group of protesters that marched in Toronto demanding closure for the families and victims of government-and church-sponsored residential schools.

The federal government estimates as many as 100,000 children attended residential schools. Annett said the best estimate is that 40,000 to 50,000 kids simply went missing between 1840 and 1940 and their families never heard from them again.

The schools have long been assailed as hotbeds of physical and sexual abuse and other human rights violations. The federal government apologized in 1998, saying that "attitudes of racial and cultural superiority led to a suppression of aboriginal culture and values."

The protesters are attempting to use the Access to Information Act to obtain the locations of unmarked graves where children were buried near residential schools and all available information on how they died, Annette said.

"We're here for the survivors and the residential school families who continue to suffer under the fact that they don't know what happened to their relatives, and they simply want them brought home," he said.

Among the protesters was Gary Wassaykeesic, who said his experience in a residential school robbed him of his culture.

"I was a little kid and I was told I'm going for a trip - this trip has lasted me 46 years," he said.

"To this day I've lost my language, to this day I've lost my culture, I don't know how to trap, I don't know how to hunt. I know how to be a concrete Indian."

He said the world always reacts with outrage and great concern when news of genocide is reported and yet, there's not enough attention being paid to the tens of thousands of aboriginal kids who are unaccounted for.

"We talk about it but what can we do as a people when we don't have the resources, we don't have the money, we don't have the connections," Wassaykeesic said.

"We have stories but nobody ever investigates the stories."

Protester John Garlow said he never went through the residential school system but his father did, which inevitably left him scarred too.

"They took my dad at an early age and the way they treated him, some of that has been bestowed upon me," Garlow said.

"Me, I'm a survivor because I went through a lot of the residential school abuse through my father."

The federal government is in the process of establishing a truth and reconciliation commission which will investigate ways to identify the number of children who died at residential schools and the causes of death, said Kimberly Phillips, a spokeswoman for Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada, a federal department created in 2001.

The commission will go over church and government records and interview former students, staff and anyone else who wishes to be heard, Phillips said.

No criminal investigations will be carried out.

Spokespeople for the three churches said they would co-operate fully with the commission.