



Indigenous protestors march past the Canadian parliament in Ottawa, Ontario in 2007

## Canada to apologize to natives for century of abuses

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OTTAWA (AFP) — Chief Phil Fontaine was ripped from his family at age six in 1951 and while his mother wept, was forcibly enrolled in a boarding school set up to assimilate Canada's indigenous peoples.

His 10-year education left him and 80,000 fellow aboriginals who attended the segregated schools disconnected from their culture, families, communities and feeling "ashamed" of being born native, he told AFP.

The experience has also been blamed for gross poverty and desperation in native communities that breeds abuse, suicide, and crime.

Wednesday, as part of a multi-billion dollar settlement with former students -- the largest settlement in Canadian history -- Prime Minister Stephen Harper will officially apologize for what Fontaine, now chief of the Assembly of First Nations, describes as the "darkest chapter in Canada's history."

And it will be the five-year focus of a commission headed by Canada's top aboriginal jurist, appointed in April to probe abuses of natives at the schools over more than a century.

"It was cultural genocide," said Ted Quwezance, a residential school alumni and director of the National Residential School Survivors' Society.

Beginning in 1874, 150,000 Indian, Inuit and Metis children in Canada were forcibly enrolled in the boarding schools run by Christian churches on behalf of the federal government in an effort to integrate them into society.

Some 80,000 survivors alleged abuse by headmasters and teachers, who stripped them of their culture and language.

"They tried to kill the Indian in the child, to eradicate any sense of Indian-ness from Canada," said Fontaine.

"It was two cultures clashing, one dominant and imposing its will on the other, and the other suffered. We suffered," he said.

Most of Canada's residential schools were shut down in the 1970s. The last one closed in 1996 in Saskatchewan province.

Only the grotto remains at Fort Alexander Indian Residential School in Manitoba, where Fontaine says he witnessed "harsh" beatings from custodians.

The school was only four kilometers (2.5 miles) from his home on the Sagkeeng First Nation reservation, but he was allowed to see his Ojibway family for only a few hours each Sunday and on holidays.

"We were often reminded of who we were, which was less than white people. We were called 'savages' at least once a day," he recalled.

"It was also very hard on me being separated from my family for such a long time. It created anxiety, a lot of sadness."

His first day at school, in a dark dormitory split in two sections for 125 older and younger boys, "all you heard that night was kids crying," he said. "It was scary. I was just a little boy who missed his mom and dad."

There are some 1.3 million aboriginals in Canada, out of a total population of 33 million.

Justice Harry LaForme, chair of the landmark Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission, commented: "All of us aboriginal people in some way have been impacted by the Indian residential school tragedy."

Fontaine said Harper's remarks are expected to take responsibility for past harms and for "denying us our existence as peoples."

Following his apology, the commission plans to hear testimony from thousands of survivors and officials, as well as gather and review millions of government and church documents to be made public for the first time.

"There's a chapter of history we know exists, but it has no pages," LaForme said. His aim is to write the missing chapter, "to try to find out the truth, and hopefully move toward reconciliation," he said.

Critics lament LaForme's efforts will not hold anyone criminally responsible. But the judge countered: "Aboriginal justice is restorative in nature," looking to mend fences, not prosecute criminals.

Australia's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd similarly apologized in February to thousands of aboriginal children removed from their families between 1910 and 1970 and sending them to live with foster parents or in institutions.

But poetic words alone will not improve the lives of marginalized natives, said Quewezance. "You can apologize all you want but if there is no action after the apology, how can you have reconciliation and forgiveness."