

Natives say they're shut out of apology process

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FROM MONDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

FEBRUARY 11, 2008 AT 5:48 AM EST

OTTAWA — The Assembly of First Nations says it has been shut out of negotiations on a federal apology on Indian residential schools, raising the possibility that it will be rejected by former students.

The national chief of the AFN, Phil Fontaine, wrote to Prime Minister Stephen Harper last week expressing "deep concern" about the process the Conservative government was using to word its promised apology.

After resisting repeated requests for an apology, the government announced in last fall's Throne Speech that one was forthcoming.

"However, we have since been informed that the text of the apology is being drafted without consultation with the Assembly of First Nations," Mr. Fontaine wrote, according to a copy of the letter obtained by The Globe and Mail. "If this is the case, not only does the federal government risk having the apology refuted by survivors and First Nations peoples, we also believe the Federal Government would be in breach of the Political Agreement between the AFN and the Government of Canada executed on May 30, 2005."

That 2005 agreement with the previous Liberal government set the process in place for the multibillion-dollar, out-of-court Indian residential schools settlement that was later completed and agreed to by the Conservatives.

The AFN is Canada's largest aboriginal lobby group. It is funded by the federal government and its activities must be approved by the chiefs of the country's 630 native reserves.

The 2006 out-of-court deal promised to create a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that would hold cross-country hearings and write the official history of the system that had a direct impact the lives of Canadian aboriginals for more than 100 years.

The official launch of the commission was expected to occur early this year and it was widely thought the apology would coincide with that announcement.

Ted Yeomans, a spokesman for Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl, would not comment directly on whether the government is involving the AFN in the drafting of the apology, but offered a general pledge to consult the native organization.

"We have and will continue to consult with the AFN with reference to an apology," he said in an e-mail yesterday. "Our government is committed to delivering a respectful and meaningful apology to all former students of residential schools."

Mr. Fontaine's letter to the Prime Minister includes a copy of a draft apology written by the AFN in 2004.

The 2½ -page draft apology would have Ottawa admit that: "It was Canada's policy to assimilate Aboriginal peoples into one, non-aboriginal, Christian community of Canada The basic premise of the vision of re-socialization and language was violent: 'To kill the Indian in the child,' was the

stated goal of residential schools whereby at the end of the process of assimilation, it was said that 'all the Indian there is in the race should be dead.' "

In addition to acknowledging that children were abused in the schools, the AFN draft apology would have Canada admit that: "In addition, inadequate oversight and control by the government resulted in neglect, abuse and even deaths of children in residential schools."

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