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Canada

Reconciliation, truth mandate of commission

Updated: April 29 at 12:45 AM CDT

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OTTAWA -- The "horrendous" legacy of Canada's residential schools system will come out into the open with the launching of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the commission's new chairman said Monday.

Ontario Court of Appeal Justice Harry LaForme was named to lead the long-awaited public airing of survivors' stories. He said he hopes the commission will help the estimated 90,000 living survivors of residential schools, their families and communities stop being held hostage by their past.

"Through their experiences, truth will be made known, healing will begin and sincere reconciliation made possible," LaForme said.

An estimated 150,000 aboriginal and Métis children were ripped from their families and forced into residential schools, where they were forbidden from speaking their languages, practising their culture or learning from their parents.

The schools were run by churches on behalf of the federal government.

Many students reported physical, psychological and sexual abuse while in the schools. The last residential schools were closed in the 1970s.

The federal government will issue an apology for the horrors of residential schools before the House of Commons rises for the summer in June.

More than \$1.3 billion has been paid out in compensation to survivors since last September under the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement.

LaForme -- considered to be the most senior aboriginal judge in Canada -- will take the commission on a five-year coast-to-coast journey to hear the stories of survivors, prepare a comprehensive historical record of the schools and then establish a research centre. Commemorative activities to permanently honour residential school students will also be part of the commission's work.

It is not intended to take the place of any legal action that may be brought against those who abused the students in the schools, Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl said. He encouraged any survivors to come forward to police if they have allegations of abuse.

Strahl said the commission is the "cornerstone" of the residential schools settlement agreement.

"It will also educate all Canadians about the Indian residential school system and the impact the system has had on aboriginal people and their communities," Strahl said.

Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief Phil Fontaine, who came forward several years ago with his own story of abuse in a residential school in Fort Alexander, Man., said the commission is the first of its kind in the developed world. He said it is long overdue and many former students unfortunately didn't live to see it happen. However, he said the important thing is that it is finally going forward.

"The truth and reconciliation commission will shed light on one of the darkest chapters in Canada's history," Fontaine said. "A history that all Canadians should be aware of, but that has been largely hidden until now. It could be a turning point in our relationship with Canada."

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