

Canada begins examination of abuses at church-run schools for Indians

The Associated Press

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TORONTO: A truth-and-reconciliation commission examining what Indian leaders call one of the most tragic and racist chapters in Canada's history will begin its work on Sunday.

The commission has a five-year mandate to study Canada's decades-long government policy requiring Canadian Indians to attend state-funded church schools, often the scenes of physical and sexual abuse.

From the 19th century until the 1970s, more than 150,000 aboriginal children were required to attend Christian schools in a painful attempt to rid them of their native cultures and languages and integrate them into Canadian society.

The federal government admitted 10 years ago that physical and sexual abuse in the once-mandatory schools was rampant. Many students recall being beaten for speaking their native languages and losing touch with their parents and customs.

That legacy of abuse and isolation has been cited by Indian leaders as the root cause of epidemic rates of alcoholism and drug addiction on reservations.

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"It's the darkest most tragic chapter in Canadian history and virtually no one knows about this," Phil Fontaine, the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, told The Associated Press.

The commission will spend five years traveling across the country to hear stories from former students, teachers and others involved in the so-called residential schools run by the Roman Catholic Church and various Protestant denominations. The goal is to give survivors a forum to tell their stories and to educate Canadians about that dark chapter in the country's history.

"It's about writing the missing chapter in Canadian history," said Fontaine. The Indian leader said he himself was a victim of sexual

abuse at a church school.

"I'm just one of many," he said.

The commission was created as part of a US\$5 billion class action settlement in 2006 — the largest in Canadian history — between the government, churches and the 90,000 surviving Indian students. About US\$60 million (€38.69 million) will be used to fund the commission's work.

The government and churches will open their records to the commission.

"I think we're in for an eye opening," Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl told The AP.

The start of the commission's work precedes a public apology that Prime Minister Stephen Harper is scheduled to deliver in Parliament on June 11.

Fontaine and others have been seeking such an acknowledgment for years.

"Never has the leader of the country apologized. It's seen as very symbolic," Strahl said.

In Australia, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a formal apology in Parliament in February to the so-called Stolen Generations — thousands of Aborigines who were forcibly taken from their families as children under assimilation policies that lasted from 1910 to 1970.

Strahl said Canada's legacy is worse.

"Our residential schools system was probably more systemic and more generational than even in Australia," Strahl said.

"The reason it was particularly horrible was that it lasted so long. It just didn't happen to a group of people for a few years, this was in many cases multigenerational and the results are still being felt."

Canada's nearly 1 million aboriginals remain the country's poorest and most disadvantaged group.

The high school graduation rate for Canadian Indians is just over half the national average, and their life expectancy is five to seven years lower than for non-aboriginals.

Suicide rates are threefold and teen pregnancies are nine times higher than the national average.

Michael Cachagee, president of the National Residential School Survivors' Society, attended three different residential schools in Ontario over 12 1/2 years beginning in 1944 when he was 4-years-old.

"I was physically and sexually abused," Cachagee said.

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"They took away some of my language and cultural identity and the effects were pronounced. I had problems with alcohol and problems with marriages and relationships and my children. When I came home my mother didn't even know who I was."

Cachagee said most Canadians do not realize what natives endured.

"They just say 'Ah, those Indians are getting a bunch of money again,'" Cachagee said.

Under the settlement, students who attended residential schools are eligible to receive US\$10,000 (€6,450) for the first school year and US\$3,000 (€1,935) for every year after. Victims of physical and sexual abuse are eligible for further compensation on top of that.

Cachagee said it is not enough and doubts most Canadians will care to hear stories like his.

Aboriginal Judge Harry LaForme, who will oversee the commission, is hopeful Canadians will be more empathetic of the plight of aboriginals once they know more.

LaForme, appointed last month, said he will spend the first three months examining the budget and planning a course of action. The commission has not decided yet when it will begin hearing testimony, but three executives that oversee the commission will begin meeting Monday.

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