



Cree Nation Response to Indian Residential Schools *Seven actions for government and religious authorities*

CHISASIBI, JUNE 14, 2021 – This morning, leadership from the Cree Nation Government, Cree Nation of Chisasibi, Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay, and Cree School Board have presented their position on the fight against the legacy of damage caused by the Indian Residential School experience in Canada.

Grand Chief Dr Abel Bosum (Cree Nation Government), Chief Daisy House (Cree Nation of Chisasibi), Bertie Wapachee (Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay) and Sarah Pashagumskum (Cree School Board) representatives of the Cree leadership in Quebec expressed the demands for action of the Cree Nation. These actions are aimed at governments and organizations to support the healing of the deep scars caused by the written or systemic assimilation policies that they supported in the past or tolerate today.

These actions, detailed in the pages below, include the following:

RECOGNITION OF INDIGENOUS REALITIES

- Acknowledge the genocide, the intergenerational trauma, and systemic racism.
- Undertake pedagogical review to ensure that all learn of the important contributions of Indigenous Peoples as well issues addressed above.
- Establish an Indian Residential School Museum in Montreal and Québec City.

COLLABORATION IN HEALING

- Upon request, assist local groups formed to respond to the needs of former students to search and document the residential school sites such as Fort George Island.
- Include Indigenous governments in any legislation which could establish public archives of Indigenous persons missing or deceased in any context.

HEALTH

- Prioritize land-based traditional treatment facilities and resources.
- Invest in the development of local health care capacity, in particular mental health.



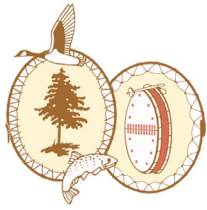
The current crisis requires more than actions by one group or another, it requires more than calls to action, it requires personal commitment and the assumption of responsibility at all levels of Government. It is for this reason that this Press Release is accompanied with personal correspondence to establish agendas and concrete actions to:

- Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada
- François Legault, Premier of Québec
- Marc Miller, Minister of Indigenous Services
- Carolyn Bennett, Minister of Crown–Indigenous Relations
- David Lametti, Minister of Justice
- Christian Dubé, Minister of Health and Social Services
- Geneviève Guilbault, Minister of Public Safety
- Ian Lafrenière, Minister Responsible for Indigenous Affairs
- Jean-François Roberge, Minister of Education
- Simon Jolin-Barrette, Minister of Justice
- Valérie Plante, Mayor of Montreal
- Régis Labeaume, Mayor of Quebec City
- President of Professional Orders
- Church Leaders
- Perry Bellegarde, Assembly of First Nations
- Ghislain Picard, Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador

Additional context supporting each action

Scars of Genocidal Acts

There are many members of the Cree Nation who still carry with them deep scars and pain from their time in numerous Indian Residential Schools across Canada. The recent revelations from Kamloops of the mass grave of 215 children has caused a resurgence of pain and anguish for those that experienced the genocidal actions of churches and previous governments. It is imperative that people understand that this goes far beyond the pain suffered by former students. Often forgotten or ignored is the pain of the communities where for 11 months every year the vibrant voices of all children would be silenced. The anguish that parents and communities were left with as their children were taken to faraway schools left indelible pains that became immeasurable for those whose children just never returned home. Even when your child came home you would be reminded by witnessing the broken families whose children never



returned, that your child's absence was not temporary but a real threat that you would lose them forever. To this day community members remember the evening the day children were taken away and the sound of crying that would start in one tent and would spread like a painful wave through the whole community as parents and grandparents tried to come to terms with what they had lost.

The legacy of Indian Residential Schools is particularly cruel to our youth of today. Although it might help our youth understand, as is common with those who have experienced severe trauma, many parents do not share what they went through at Indian Residential Schools. To share stories of torture, physical and sexual abuse, and what had to be done in order to survive goes against the very instincts associated with parenthood, as every fibre begs us to protect our children from the ugliness in the world. So, we suffer in silence and our youth suffer in the aftermath without explanation or reason. The painful legacy of Indian Residential Schools will not end when the last student passes on because it is a cancer that has spread to every aspect of our lives, the fabric of our communities. It can be linked to the chronic pandemic of social and health problems that all Indigenous communities suffer from today. It is not any surprise that we over-represent prison populations, poverty demographics or chronic health diseases associated with a broken spirit.

Recognizing the Impacts

We know that the discovery in Kamloops will not be an isolated event and we know that things will get harder. We know that more terrible memories will come to the surface, there will be more guilt for surviving, there will be more anger, there will be more despair. If we are to do more than survive, we, everyone, must not turn away. For our communities this will be challenging and will have to be done at a pace and in manner that does not reopen old wounds solely perpetuating victimization. It is community groups, local governments or First Nations Government that must take the lead to ensure that all actions are taken to achieve the delicate balance of ending silence but not at the expense of a community member's dignity. There is an important role for governments and organizations, which are constitutionally obligated to support all Indigenous peoples, to go beyond current practices of denial, avoidance and minimization so that our society as a whole comes to terms with these these horrific acts of genocide in our collective history.



Fort George Island Residential Schools

There are two residential school sites in Eeyou Istchee on the island of Fort George at the former site of the community of Chisasibi. For years, former students and community groups have tried to fulfill the needs of former students who would come to the site and the community looking for solace. Annual Gatherings began five years ago on Fort George Island and the groups over recent years have made calls for support and other concrete measures for addressing these needs. Shamefully, all levels of government have failed to respond to their calls for assistance. At the two residential schools on Fort George Island, there were students who were not only Cree or from Quebec. The Indian Residential School system was built and mandated as an institution to erase identity, so it should come as no surprise that there was no logic as to the origin of students and where they were sent. Cree students from Eeyou Istchee were sent all over Canada just as Indigenous people from other nations were sent to Fort George.

The Cree Nation of Chisasibi and the Cree Nation Government do plan on initiating actions to search and document the residential school sites on Fort George Island. It must be understood that these actions will be led by the groups that formed locally to respond to the needs of former students. The local government, the Cree Nation Government, regional institutions, and organizations such as the Eeyou Police Force will be there to support these efforts. All actions taken on site must be respectful of all students who walked through the doors of the two schools, as well as their families and their communities. Elders and Councils of Elders will be relied upon to provide the wisdom and spiritual guidance to ensure that we do not cause more unnecessary harm as we undertake what will be a very painful process. The Cree Nation and the community of Chisasibi see this as an important opportunity to set the standard, to demonstrate how they would like to be treated at residential school sites across the country where our students suffered or were taken from their communities forever.

Community Health and Well-Being

Since the news of the Kamloops discovery broke, the pain in our communities has been growing. As the remains of our children are found at other sites across the country and the prospect that we may find the bodies of more innocent children in our own community, the need for social and mental health services will grow far beyond what is currently available.

The Cree Nation is fortunate to have renewed a Health Care Agreement with the Government of Quebec on October 7, 2019, which contains provisions for the development of more mental health care services, resources and infrastructure needed to serve our communities. Unfortunately, there are too many First Nations across Canada that do not have such Agreements



and to this day find themselves falling through the cracks as provincial and federal governments squabble over jurisdiction and shift responsibility over the aftermath of what their predecessors have created. This is not acceptable. It is also not lost on the Cree Nation that all we have at this time is an agenda, which is an important first step. However, if it is not accompanied with prioritization and concrete implementation measures it will be meaningless.

There is a clear obligation on the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay and the Quebec Ministry of Health to ensure that meaning and efficiency are brought to the agenda that has been established. Community, land-based traditional treatment facilities are urgently needed. These institutions will also need to go beyond their narrowly defined mandates to partner and engage with the institutions responsible for Justice, Public Security, Housing and Education as the terrible legacy of Indian Residential Schools and the health of our communities is directly tied to matters of crime and incarceration rates, youth protection, chronic illness, housing conditions and poor performance in education. Although short-term efforts such as recruiting mental health care or social workers are appreciated, the long-term solutions require building local capacity to address local problems.

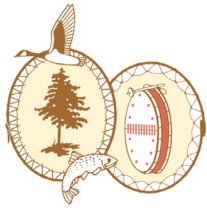
Systemic Racism: The Courage to Name It

The Cree Nation is thankful for the outpouring of support from neighbours and friends who were shocked by the Kamloops discovery, some of whom having asked what they can do to help. The rest of Quebec and Canada must stop denying that the systemic racism, which allowed Indian Residential Schools, still exists to this day and can be found in the policies, assumptions and foundations of all government institutions. We must not look away. We must face the ugliness of our past and understand its impact on the present if we are to ensure that we do not allow it to be perpetuated into our future.

It is unacceptable that June is celebrated as Indigenous History Month since 2009, but there are both non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples across the country who are completely unaware of our histories or even the special designation of the month of June.

Pedagogy as a Cornerstone

If we are to transition to reconciliation, healing, patience and understanding, education will need to be the cornerstone of our collective efforts. A revision of school curriculum is required to ensure that all Canadians learn of the important contributions of Indigenous Peoples as well as the injustices and genocidal actions that we have suffered. Collectively, we can no longer wait for



children of today to assume the leadership of tomorrow armed with a better of understanding of our origins and scars. It is for this reasons that all adult education centers, professional orders, or Ministries of Immigration have an obligation to complement all forms of adult training to ensure that the education of all our Peoples begins today.

Geography or the very isolating nature of our “reservations” is often the excuse as to why there is little interaction between our communities and why we remain so ignorant of each other’s realities. Just as the Holocaust Museum of Montreal is an important institution in ensuring that a terrible chapter in world history is not forgotten nor repeated, a similar institution is required for Indian Residential Schools in Montreal and Quebec City.

Important actions have been taken in recent years to apologize or begin to compensate for the harm suffered by Indian Residential School survivors. More recently, Quebec has adopted Bill 79, which seeks to assist individuals and families in securing documents or information on children who never returned home from medical centers. The scope of the law requires adaptation as children were taken and never returned for reasons beyond medical treatment. In fact, Education was the single largest pretext for the institutionalized abduction of children and its glaring absence from the law is a clear indication that more is needed. Further, all measures and implementation mechanisms must be adapted to taken into account the community interest or the need of society as a whole to have access to information. Not all youth or community members will be comfortable or confident in contacting a government representative for assistance with painful events that are associated with the governments they do not feel are their own. Mechanisms will be required to ensure that Indigenous Governments can represent and serve the needs of their own people.

Assuming Responsibility

Finally, if there is to be an end to the denial that has characterized all aspect of relations with Indigenous people, the establishment of public archive is required. This will be a very sensitive exercise requiring close collaboration of all levels of government to ensure that individuals are not harmed further in the name of putting an end to denial.

During these trying and painful times Indigenous people across the country need empathy from their neighbours and friends. Guilt will only close and harden the heart when openness is needed. Sympathy that is fleeting; it will only allow the continued dismissal of Indigenous peoples and the realities we live.



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