

United Nations Human Rights Council 15th Session,
September 13th – October 1st, 2010, Palais de Nations, Geneva
Intervention by Chief Wilton Littlechild, Commissioner, TRC of Canada
Agenda Item 5: report of the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Thank you Mr. President. I make this intervention as a Commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada to express support for proposal 8 of the EMRIP's report (A/HRC/15/36 p.5). The TRC of Canada focuses on the past and ongoing impacts on Indigenous Peoples of the Residential Schools System in Canada. In total, more than 150,000 Indigenous children participated in this system, which was legally mandated by the Canadian government. There were more than 130 residential schools throughout Canada beginning in the 1880's, primarily operated by churches. The last one was closed in 1996. In addition to the trauma of forced separation from families and parents, many children suffered systematic physical, cultural, spiritual, sexual and emotional abuse. Children were often punished for speaking Indigenous languages. Parents, extended families and communities were traumatized by the forced removal of their children, in many cases for years. Unknown numbers of children died in the schools from illness, injury, abuse, neglect and suicide.

The Residential School policy's stated purpose was assimilation of Indigenous Peoples. On June 11th, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized to former students of the Residential Schools for Canada's role in their 150 years of operation. He said "Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm and has no place in our country". Mr. President, I was one of those former students, having spent 14 years in Residential schools.

The Canadian process is unique among Truth Commissions in its scope, goals and history as it is the only one which specifically focuses on human rights violations carried out against Indigenous children. Uniquely, this TRC was not created by the government. Rather it was established as an independent body with a 5-year mandate through the efforts of residential school survivors themselves as part of the largest class action lawsuits in Canadian history.

Like other Truth Commissions around the world, it will establish what happened in the past through the direct testimony of those who were directly impacted. It will investigate the pattern of abuse and establish a very important foundation for future reconciliation and improved relations. Our Commission has much to gain from, and offer to the world community through international dialogue on TRC processes "with the potential to facilitate strengthened recognition and implementation of the rights of Indigenous Peoples" as stated in the EMRIP's report.

We therefore support the EMRIP's proposal and respectfully urge the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights to organize an International Expert Seminar on Truth and Reconciliation processes as a mechanism for conflict resolution and improved relations between States and Indigenous Peoples including in relation to Treaties and the UN Declaration. The TRC in Canada would be honoured to co-host this Expert Seminar. We look forward to working with the OHCHR in this regard, and welcome the participation of States, UN Experts, Indigenous Peoples and other interested parties.

Finally Mr. President, we reiterate our call for an International Decade on Reconciliation and welcome the support of this esteemed body for its establishment. Thank you, Hai Hai.

TRC Commissioner Chief Wilton Littlechild
September 21, 2010