

## Procession marks first anniversary of residential schools apology

OTTAWA — Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine walked beside Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl on Thursday as they led a procession of about 1,000 aboriginals, students, union workers and church officials to the steps of Parliament Hill to mark the first anniversary of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology for residential schools.

On the steps, Fontaine held an eagle feather and a drawing of a man and a woman given to him by a seven-year-old.

"This day is what this person is saying to us, this National Day of Reconciliation. Say sorry, say sorry, be nice," said Fontaine. "This is from a seven-year-old person, but obviously a very wise seven-year-old."

Fontaine said that while the National Day of Reconciliation was about forgiveness and facing the dark moments of the country's history with the original residents of the land, it was also about showing Canadians that they need First Nations people.

"It is about reminding Canadians how very important we are to them and how they need us if we are to build a beautiful future for this country," he said.

Strahl opened his speech by repeating Harper's words from June 11, 2008.

"On behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians I stand before you in this chamber so central to our life as a country to apologize to aboriginal peoples for Canada's role in the Indian residential school system," said Strahl, quoting parts of Harper's speech. "The burden has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a government and as a country. The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the aboriginal peoples for failing them so profoundly."

And while the day was about coming to grips with the past, the present also made an unplanned appearance. Akwesasne Mohawk Grand Chief Tim Thompson took to the microphone in an unscheduled speech and demanded the federal government meet with the leadership of his community to end the ongoing closure of the Canadian border post at Akwesasne.

The border was shut May 31 after the First Nations residents said they would not allow the planned arming of border guards on June 1.

Elmer Courchene, 73, spent 10 years in residential schools in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. He said his time there was one filled with fear.

"You were always walking around with fear. Fear whether you would be hit or slapped," he said. "I don't ever want to happen, what happened; to be taken away from your family."

Meagan Commanda, 25, said the day was also about her generation that still feels the impact of residential schools.

"I think this day is important because aboriginal people are still suffering from what happened at residential schools and we still feel it, even if we weren't there," said Commanda, from Kitigan Zibi First Nation, near Maniwaki, Ont.

About 150,000 First Nation, Inuit and Metis children were removed from their families and placed in residential schools across Canada.

Source: Canwest News Service