

First Nations threaten action

'We don't want taxpayer money. We want a share of our own wealth,' Strahl told Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl on Thursday faced an ultimatum from First Nations chiefs, who warned Canada would face a prolonged campaign of economic disruption in the coming year unless the federal government immediately moved to resolve long-standing grievances.

Strahl was hit with the ultimatum during a question-and-answer session with chiefs following his speech to the Assembly of First Nations special chiefs assembly.

The confrontation reflected the gathering's increasingly feisty mood. On Wednesday, chiefs passed a resolution calling for an "international year of action."

In an orchestrated move, the chiefs first demanded that Strahl commit the federal government to support major improvements to native education. Then they delivered their terms.

"We are not begging, we will move forward one way or another. We will do what has to be done," said Kitigan Zibi Chief Gilbert Whiteduck, whose community sits next to Maniwaki, 120 kilometres north of Ottawa. "I am calling upon you to work with us."

With chiefs and delegates standing in support, Whiteduck said native leaders wanted increased funding for education from the federal government and support for efforts to create native-controlled education systems based on First Nations languages and culture. The dollar amount contemplated hovered in the \$1.5-billion range, Whiteduck said in a separate interview.

"We want today a commitment on your part to engage with us. Yes or no," he said.

After demands from chiefs from British Columbia, Saskatchewan and northern Quebec, Roseau River First Nations Chief Terrance Nelson delivered the warning.

"We are going to stand between the white man and his money because we know the money comes from our resources," Nelson said. "We don't want taxpayer money. We want a share of our own wealth."

Nelson said chiefs across the country also planned to lobby every foreign embassy in Canada, U.S. journalists and countries interested in Canadian resources, such as China, to deal directly with First Nations.

"The question of whether or not there are going to be blockades this coming year is going to be answered by the Government of Canada," said Nelson, whose community is about 88 kilometres south of Winnipeg. "Are you going to work with us, or are you going to leave us where we are at?"

Strahl said he was willing to engage in talks with the First Nations chiefs.

"Education makes everything else we talk about easier," he said.

However, he also cautioned: "I don't think blockades get you what you want."

Source:

By Jorge Barrera, Canwest News Service

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