

Innu fight against

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government called 'life and death struggle'

HAMILTON — The 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's discovery of the New World is nothing to be happy about, a native leader says.

"There is no reason to celebrate in 1992," Innu Chief Daniel Ashini told a few hundred people Sunday at the opening of the Drum Beat Indigenous People's Conference at McMaster University.

"The history of America is a sordid history of rape and pillaging. It is a history no one should be proud of," said Mr. Ashini, whose people have been waging a battle against low-level military flights and establishment of a NATO training field in Labrador.

Mr. Ashini said that expecting natives to let "bygones be bygones" is similar to "telling Jewish people to forget what happened to them at the hands of the Nazis."

He was among several speakers at the first day of the three-day conference, which has drawn native leaders from across Canada and from the United States, and South and Central America. The event is intended to let them air their concerns about the environment, their language and culture, land claims and other issues, and to find solutions.

Mr. Ashini classed the Innu's fight against the federal government as a "life and death struggle."

He said some dismiss their concerns as political opportunism but that is not fair.

The military flights create enough noise to harm the health of people and wildlife. And the training field is an immense project with wide-ranging consequences. "We have reason to fear for our future if it goes ahead," he said.

The speaker many at the conference were waiting for was Donald Marshall Jr., the Mic Mac from Nova Scotia wrongly jailed for a murder he did not commit. Although scheduled to speak for 30 minutes, he wrapped up his remarks in less than five minutes and barely touched his time in prison.

"I'm not going to talk about prison because I'd spend 10 years talking about it."

Instead Mr. Marshall, who was introduced as an emerging leader, said greater attention needs to be paid to native youth. "These young people are our future and most are able to be leaders."

He said that one day he wants to operate a centre for native youth that will "get them on the right road."

Conference organizers said Mr. Marshall did not want to be interviewed by reporters. A couple of bodyguards were assigned to make sure he was not.

The history of how natives were treated by European settlers and the future of native youth were popular issues with most speakers.

Other issues were the plight of native language and culture.

Bob Jamieson, a translator for the Six Nations Confederacy, recalled how as a boy he was punished for speaking his language in school. That was among the ways that natives have been "brainwashed."

"A lot of people today say it's no use, how can you go back? You don't go back. You advance together" with non-natives, he said.

Mr. Jamieson also decried the lack of discipline exercised on children nowadays and the practice of natives marrying non-natives.