

Abused natives plan forgiveness conference

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TORONTO (CP) — Natives who allegedly suffered physical, emotional and sexual abuse at a residential school in Fort Albany, Ont., want the government and church to join them in a forgiveness conference.

"Something was torn apart a long time ago," Chief Edmund Matatawabin of the Fort Albany First Nation on James Bay said Friday. "We are trying to seek justice and healing for our people."

The federal and Ontario governments, as well as the church, must apologize and acknowledge their roles in the abuse and provide compensation, he said.

A five-member provincial police team has been investigating allegations of abuse at St. Anne's Residential School for more than a year and has conducted close to 500 interviews, said Det.-Sgt. Henry Malboeuf.

No charges have been laid.

Matatawabin's survivors' group, known as Petabek Keywaywin, wants to avoid a long, drawn-out court battle that would have "high potential to reabuse victims."

Instead, it has hired two mediators to approach the governments and church groups to take part in the "healing process."

The school was financed by the federal government and run by the Oblates, a Roman Catholic missionary order, until it closed in the early 1970s.

Teachers followed an Ontario Education Ministry curriculum and classes were taught in English and French.

Petabek Keywaywin is urging that classes in native schools throughout the North be taught in Cree or Ojibway until at least Grade 3.

It also wants healing lodges for counselling and a new building to replace the residential school in Fort Albany.

Matatawabin said 30 former school residents told stories of abuse experienced between 1953 and 1973 during a healing con-

ference that brought victims together almost two years ago.

"Ten of the men were sexually abused, almost all of them were physically abused in other ways, spiritual abuse, humiliated, strapped, hit with rulers, hair pulled, stabbed with a pencil, made to eat their vomit," he said.

Three years ago, the leader of Canada's largest Catholic missionary order apologized for physical and sexual abuse native children suffered at church-run schools.

The abuse was "inexcusable, intolerable and a betrayal of trust in one of its most serious forms," Rev. Doug Crosby, president of the Oblate Conference of Canada, said at a mass in Lac St. Anne, Alta.