

First Nations 'appalled' by Ministry comments

PORT ALBERNI-A tribal council representing First Nations in the region had strong words for the federal government in response to recent statements by the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs regarding the plight of indigenous women in Canada.

In an interview with the Ottawa Citizen released on Dec. 12, Bernard Valcourt, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, addressed the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women.

The RCMP has reported 1,181 such cases since 1980 - reflecting a murder and missing persons rate several times larger than the average for all Canadians.

In the Citizen interview Valcourt said "Obviously, there's a lack of respect for women and girls on reserves," he said. "If the guys grow up believing that women have no rights, that's how they are treated."

Valcourt made the comments in an interview with the Citizen just days after aboriginal leaders met in Winnipeg, where they insisted that an inquiry is critical. Their calls were reinforced by a poignant speech from 16-year-old Rinelle Harper, who was assaulted and left for dead on a riverbank in Winnipeg last month.

In her remarks, the young woman urged hundreds of Assembly of First Nations chiefs to keep pushing for an inquiry.

"I respond by saying, 'Listen, Rinelle, I have a lot of sympathy for your situation. And I guess that victims ... have different views and we respect them,'" Valcourt said.

But Valcourt argued that the issue of violence against indigenous women is "too important" to use an inquiry as an "excuse" for not taking action.

The new AFN national chief, Perry Bellegarde, said he will press Prime Minister Stephen Harper to "open his heart" and understand that the problem has become a "black mark on Canada" and that an inquiry is necessary.

Valcourt suggested Bellegarde won't get far with his argument. "If you really have heart, and if you take this at heart, you will not ask the government of Canada to spin its wheels for years over an inquiry that will bring about what? Exactly what we know today."

Valcourt said he didn't want to directly put words in the prime minister's mouth. "But I suspect he will tell him, 'Perry, it's not a question of heart. It's a question of people pulling together, addressing the issue, and taking action.'"

In recent months, the issue has taken on greater political significance. An

RCMP report found 1,181 cases of murdered or missing indigenous women in Canada since 1980.

Bellegarde said an inquiry would educate Canadians about the "travesty."

"There are root causes that have to be addressed," Bellegarde said. "The homelessness, the poverty, the alcohol and drug abuse. The systems that are there need to be changed."

Valcourt strongly defended his government's record. "I beg to differ that the federal government is the ultimate solution here," he said. "The solution is at the community level. Now, who are the chiefs and councils assembling (in their) communities to address this issue?"

He said the federal government will help aboriginal communities if they need it. "But, you know, someone has got to take ownership of this issue. And even if we try to do it at the federal level, it won't change anything."

Valcourt said the federal government has taken action to protect on-reserve aboriginal women through recent legislation that provides matrimonial property rights. He chided the premiers for making a "big declaration" last summer about how a federal inquiry should be appointed.

"What steps are they taking? Most of these so-

lutions that can bear on this are of provincial jurisdiction."

In her response to Valcourt's comments, Debra Foxcroft, president of the Nuuchah-nulth Tribal Council, stated the federal minister was "disgusting and contemptuous" by attempting to minimize issues affecting aboriginal women in Canada.

"The minister's disrespectful and judgmental comments have undermined any trust we might have in the federal government's ability and willingness to work together respectfully in our best interest," said Foxcroft in a statement. "Such blatant stereotyping cannot help but influence public opinion, creating a perception

in the minds of Canadians that First Nations communities are lawless, violent, dangerous places to live."

Vigils have been held annually at the Port Alberni Friendship Centre to honor aboriginal women lost to violent crime. Local victims include Margaret Delaine Cloutier, a 39-year-old who was stabbed in a Fourth Avenue apartment in 2001.

Foxcroft demanded that Valcourt apologize for his statements or resign.

"The social issues faced by First Nations communities today are internationally recognized as the direct result of an aggressive and systematic colonial campaign of oppression, cultural as-

similation, physical and emotional abuse," she said. "We call for an immediate public apology and retraction of these insensitive, disrespectful, prejudiced and absolutely unacceptable comments."