

Government should apologize for damage done by residential schools

THUNDER BAY, Ont.-The federal government is afraid of admitting guilt if it apologizes to natives for the damage done by residential schools, says the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

"The important thing here is for the government to say 'we accept our responsibility'," Phil Fontaine told about 50 Nishnawbe-Aski chiefs gathered Thursday for a three-day conference.

Fontaine said he is among the hundreds of natives suffering the effects of spending childhood years in residential schools.

"I spent ten years in a residential school and I'm forced to live with that and to deal with it in my own way," he said.

"A lot of people have suffered because of residential schools and the pain persists in our communities."

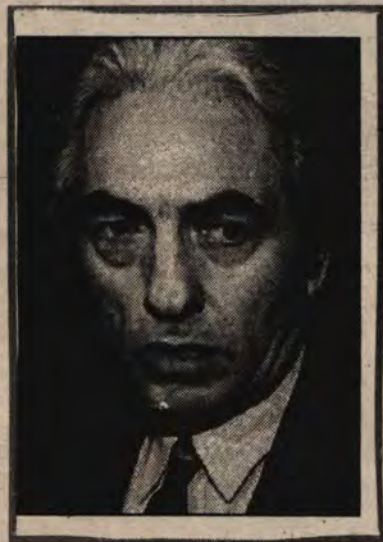
Fontaine said he has asked

the government to set up a process to heal the wounds caused by the schools.

The residential school system was set up at the turn of the century with the purpose of assimilating natives. Most of the schools were run by the Roman Catholic, Anglican and United Churches but some were run by the federal government. Ottawa was ultimately responsible for the system.

Many natives say the system was designed to make them ashamed of their background. Hundreds of former students are suing the government for abuse they say they suffered in the schools.

Meanwhile, chiefs at the conference agreed to expand the Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service to 103 officers from 88, eliminating the need for Ontario Provincial Police officers in the region.



Phil Fontaine

The Nishnawbe-Aski nation is an area of about 540,000 square hectares which includes 30,000 people. -CP-