

# Former AFN Chief calls for peace conference

*Continued from front*

government? No, they didn't have to. Instead of sending the weapons and soldiers to support the American initiative, they could have sent the same people, the same equipment, to places where the refugees are now to provide humanitarian help. We could have been the nurses and the cooks, instead of being part of the force for violence."

Mercredi also called on religious leaders across Canada to join publicly in decrying both the recent terrorist acts and the current military action in Afghanistan.

"I'm advocating...that the spiritual people of all faiths convene their own special gathering in this country. If they believe in the tenants of their faith, they should come together...Those leaders can influence the peace making process."

He criticized the nation's spiritual leaders for failing to more strongly voice condemnation of military action in the Middle East.

"Where are the spiritual leaders in the country? Where are they? Why are they so silent? What does their spirituality mean if they are silent to all these acts of violence around the world?"

The absence of a unified voice against armed retaliation, said Mercredi, has left Canadians feeling powerless in today's political climate.

"What do I do as one person? What can I do besides watch television? That is what most people are thinking. There's a feeling of powerlessness. We have no way of expressing our political will collectively, because we are not united."

What Canadians can do as individuals, Mercredi urged the audience of over 500, is to ignore the rhetoric of war which he said has dominated the airwaves since Sept. 11.

"The message is always there that what the Americans are doing is moral, legal and right. The message that we are getting consistently is the same, that the Taliban regime is corrupt and evil," he said.

"I recommend that you stop hate, that you not listen to those messages that try

to teach you to hate more. Put deaf ears to that noise about the 'evil one,' about the 'evil Americans.'"

He insisted that while a discussion of a peaceful solution to the problem of terrorism is highly unpopular in North America today, it is vital for Canadians to continue to pursue that discourse.

"It's clear people do not want terrorism, but they also do not want war — but to speak out today in Canada and the United States is not easy. It is not easy to defend peace. But I say to you it's even less easy to defend violence."

"An act of kindness for your oppressor is more powerful than an act of violence. That is a lesson that we have learned as indigenous people. We can go on hating, and we have every reason to that, but we destroy ourselves if we do that. We destroy what we believe as a people what humanity should be."

He also cited indigenous history in cautioning all Canadians against holding any race or faith accountable for the recent terrorist attacks.

"I remember the history of what happened to indigenous people in North America. I remember the history too well to understand how racism feeds into violence."

He stressed pursuing a peaceful solution to global terrorism, and understanding the root causes of terrorism in order to eradicate it, does not diminish the tragedy of Sept. 11.

"I am not blind to what happened in New York. What happened there was beyond anyone's sense of morality, but I also am not blind to what's happening, what I see in the other country called Afghanistan, the subject of all these attacks," he said.

What will win the fight against terrorism, added Mercredi, is an effort by all sides involved in the current conflict to understand each other and to find commonality.

"We have to appeal to everybody's sense of justice. Even the oppressor, whoever the oppressor is, has a sense of justice. We have to look into that."