

# Residential school abuse survivors seek \$1 billion in damages

**NORTH VANCOUVER** - Survivors of abuse at native residential schools in British Columbia are seeking an estimated \$1 billion in damages.

The money would come from civil lawsuits filed on behalf of an estimated 2,000 survivors of residential schools and their families.

The lawsuits would be part of an international strategy that views British Columbia as the most favorable climate for large-scale class-action lawsuits, the First Nations Summit was told at a meeting Wednesday.

The summit represents most on-reserve chiefs of B.C.'s 196 Indian bands.

Each survivor could get up to \$500,000, said a legal opinion by Vancouver lawyer Karim Ramji. There are about 125 living victims from each of the 16 B.C. schools.

"This would mean that the law-

suit for each school would be approximately \$62,500,000, and for all 16 schools, this would amount to a lawsuit of close to \$1 billion," said Ramji.

No class-action suit based on residential-school abuse has been filed in British Columbia.

But 49 individual lawsuits have been filed stemming from abuse at the schools, run in the provinces from 1858 to 1984 by churches under contract to the federal government.

Vancouver lawyers David Klein, who conducts class-action suits, and David Paterson, who on Wednesday filed 18 of the civil suits, confirm B.C. courts in similar non-native sexual-abuse cases have awarded damages for \$400,000 to \$600,000.

"Class-action suits are a definite option," said Tl'azt'en Grand Chief Ed John, a lawyer and summit spokesman.

"We've always said our primary focus will be on seeking redress for individuals who suffered not only criminal acts like sexual assault but also cultural assimilation, as well as bringing abusers to justice in criminal courts."

The summit has endorsed an international strategy on Indian residential schools that calls for lawsuits also to be filed in the United States and Australia, where there were similar residential schools.

It is being spearheaded by Phil Lane, a U.S.-born Dakota Sioux film-maker and activist now based in Lethbridge, Alta.

Lane has enlisted the help of Texas lawyer Sylvia Demarest, who just won \$119.6 million for 11 non-natives molested by a Catholic priest. It is the largest judgment ever in a clergy sexual-molestation case in the United States.