

# Aboriginals complain of exclusion from first ministers meeting

OTTAWA (CP) - Aboriginal leaders have written Prime Minister Jean Chretien to complain about being excluded from a first ministers meeting that begins today.

Denying aboriginals a seat at the table is not in keeping with Ottawa's efforts to patch up its deteriorated relationship with First Nations, the leaders said at a news conference.

Aboriginals have long complained about being left out of premiers meetings.

Phil Fontaine, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, said he is not surprised Chretien did not invite him to this gathering.

"This meeting we knew would probably not include aboriginal people," Fontaine said.

"This was an opportunity to

demonstrate good faith and reaffirm this commitment that we're going to have a new kind of relationship."

The meeting today and Friday is to deal with social issues, including health care, child poverty and youth employment - topics aboriginals say are particularly important to them.

In a letter to Chretien dated Monday, leaders of five aboriginal organizations also called on the prime minister to convene a first ministers meeting to discuss the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, released more than one year ago.

The federal government still hasn't responded to the multimillion-dollar report that was five years in the making.