

Ottawa denies blame in Native school abuses

SASKATOON (CP) - Ottawa denied responsibility Tuesday for alleged abuse at St. Philip's Residential School near Kamsack, Sask., as reports surfaced of a multimillion federal fund to address abuses at Native schools.

Federal lawyers filed a statement of defence to the St. Philip's claims at Court of Queen's Bench in Saskatoon.

The 10-page document "denies each and every allegation," adding in a cross-claim that, should Ottawa be found liable, then the Oblate order is also to blame and should also pay.

More than 20 former St. Philip's students filed statements of claim against Ottawa and the Oblate order for alleged sexual, physical and emotional abuse at the school during the 1950s and 1960s.

It's anticipated at least 130 claims will be filed.

The claims seek both general and punitive damages and include provisions for loss of educational opportunity, plus past and future medical costs.

Saskatoon lawyer Barry Singer, who represents former students of the school, said it's hard to accept the government's position in the St. Philip's case in light of the rumored compensation fund.

"On one hand, they're suggesting the government is responsible. On the other hand - in this particular case - they certainly aren't leaping to accept responsibility."

The federal response admits that some teachers were employed by the Crown but the government fulfilled its responsibility to ensure their qualifications and supervise their performance.

However, the government does not admit the former students suffered loss or damage at the hands of the teachers.

Jean-Paul Isabelle, provincial Superior for the Oblates of Manitoba, says it's simply not fair

that Ottawa is washing its hands of the residential school. The Manitoba order operated St. Philip's under contract with Ottawa.

"We thought that we were running the schools for the government," said Isabelle.

"These allegations, whether they're true or not, I don't know. I can't imagine we can be responsible for everything that goes on,"

he said.

Recent reports have said the federal government is planning to offer an apology and at least \$100 million compensation for some victims of residential schools.

In a report published Tuesday, the Winnipeg Free Press quoted unnamed sources who said the agreement between Ottawa and the Assembly of First Nations will be announced soon.