

Church, native groups seek to restart truth forum

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NATIONAL AFFAIRS WRITER

Indian, Inuit and church lawyers yesterday presented a joint proposal to Ottawa to restart the stalled commission on abuses at residential schools, according to one of the participants.

John Phillips, lawyer for the Assembly of First Nations, said parties will meet again next week to resolve the future of the troubled Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

At stake is the work of the commission, set up as part of a \$1.9 billion class-action settlement addressing the mental and physical abuse of tens of thousands of aboriginal children that occurred for more than a century at church-run institutions in Canada.

The commission was thrown into disarray last week when chair Justice Harry LaForme resigned.

"For the national chief (Phil Fontaine), the most important issue is the survivors and their stories," said Phillips. The commission mandate "must be settled – and soon."

Phillips said Fontaine is "optimistic" a solution can be found.

An estimated 80,000 people are survivors of the residential school system.

Federal justice department lawyer Paul Vickery also described "productive discussions" at yesterday's meeting in Toronto, organized by the supervising judge of the settlement agreement.

"We will meet again next week to resolve outstanding issues," he said.

Before a successor to LaForme is named, it must first be decided what the process will be. The Ontario appellate judge, a Mississauga of New Credit First Nation, was appointed last spring, after scrutiny by a panel representing stakeholders in the agreement. They include the assembly, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the federal government and the Catholic, Anglican, United and Presbyterian churches.

In his resignation letter, LaForme blamed the commission stalemate on misunderstandings by the two other commissioners of his lead role.

Officials in Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl's office left comment yesterday to the justice department.

