

Prime minister apologizes to native Canadians

By ROB GILLIES, Associated Press Writer Wed Jun 11, 5:25 PM ET

In a historic speech, Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized Wednesday to Canada's native peoples for the longtime government policy of forcing their children to attend state-funded schools aimed at assimilating them.

The treatment of children at the schools where they were often physically and sexually abused was a sad chapter in the country's history, he said from the House of Commons in an address carried live across Canada.

"Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm and has no place in our country," he said, as 11 aboriginal leaders looked on just feet away.

Indians packed into the public galleries and gathered on the lawn of Parliament Hill.

From the 19th century until the 1970s, more than 150,000 Indian children were required to attend state-funded Christian schools as part of a program to assimilate them into Canadian society.

Hundreds of former students witnessed what native leaders call a pivotal moment for Canada's more than 1 million Indians, who remain the country's poorest and most disadvantaged group. There are more than 80,000 surviving students.

"The government of Canada now recognizes that it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes and we apologize," Harper said.

"We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions, and that it created a void in many lives and communities and we apologize," Harper said.

Harper also apologized for failing to prevent the children from being physically and sexually abused at the schools.

Phil Fontaine, the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations and one of the leaders seated near Harper, wore a traditional native headdress and was allowed to speak from the floor after opposition parties demanded it.

"Finally, we heard Canada say it is sorry," Fontaine said.

"Never again will this House consider us an Indian problem for just being who we are," Fontaine said. "We heard the government of Canada take full responsibility."

He said the apology will go a long way toward repairing the relationship between aboriginals and the rest of Canada.

The federal government admitted 10 years ago that physical and sexual abuse in the schools was rampant. Many students recall being beaten for speaking their native languages and losing touch with their parents and customs.

That legacy of abuse and isolation has been cited by Indian leaders as the root cause of epidemic rates of alcoholism and drug addiction on reservations.

Fontaine was one of the first to go public with his past experiences of physical and sexual abuse.

The apology comes months after Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a similar gesture to the so-called Stolen Generations — thousands of Aborigines forcibly taken from their families as children under assimilation policies that lasted from 1910 to 1970.

But Canada has gone a step farther, offering those who were taken from their families compensation for the years they attended the residential schools. The offer was part of a lawsuit settlement.

A truth and reconciliation commission will also examine government policy and take testimony from survivors. The goal is to give survivors a forum to tell their stories and educate Canadians about a grim period in the country's history.