

Statement delivered by Honourable Eric Robinson, Minister of Aboriginal and Northern Affairs of Manitoba, Canada, during the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues' 9th session, during the panel on North America, on April 22

[text transmitted by his office to doCip (GH) on November 24, 2010]

Merci Monsieur le president, mes amis, Members of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Distinguished Representatives of Indigenous Peoples, Member States of the United Nations and guests from nations across Mother Earth. Welcome to our home, Turtle Island, my people's name for what is now called North America.

My name is Ka-Kee-Nee Konee Pewonee Okimow. I am a member of the Cree Nation in Northern Manitoba, Canada. I greet you as a proud indigenous person - and it is thanks to the efforts of people like the late George Manuel, and Dr. Willie Littlechild that I also greet you as a Deputy Premier of a Canadian province and as a Minister of the Crown.

Their efforts have insured Indigenous people can work anywhere, and in a world class way. I commend you all for being at this forum on Indigenous Issues.

Our people have endured attempts of forced assimilation. In my case it was through "de-Indianizing." At the age of five, I was taken from my family to a Residential School whose aim was to "take the Indian out of the child," and to force a foreign language on me.

(Remarks in Cree)

I've learned when a language is taken from a people it is a major step in the loss of a culture, but as you can see it is an unexpected honour to speak my language today in the Hall of the United Nations, a body whose goal is peace and understanding for all nations -- great or small.

Our peoples' struggles with colonization and rapid social change - have left us with scarred bodies and bruised spirits.

The forced adoption of our children away from their families, to other communities, provinces, and in some cases to other countries, was a blatant attack on the core of our identity and future.

In the province of Manitoba, where I am from, we experienced what we call the 60's Scoop. Our own government's statistics show more than 3,000 of our children were adopted out -- or we might as well say stolen -- from our embrace and sent to foreign cultures.

I have witnessed the effects of sexual abuse against children -- perpetrated by people working for governments and churches. It stopped boys like me from growing into decent men . instead many of us became alcoholics, drug addicts, and abusers.

There have been horrifying instances of forced sterilization of our sisters and the forced abortion of their children -- a little spoken of reality that stripped away the ability of those women to be mothers. Other marginalizations have led to the Canadian tragedy of missing and murdered aboriginal women. Our country has recorded nearly 600 cases in the last 40 years. And I commend the Canadian Government for recently taking the leadership to make this one of their priorities and for committing to work with our provinces, territories, and aboriginal people in seeking solutions.

The grim legacy of colonialism is etched in the faces of our elders, alive in the eyes of our leaders and a burden now carried by our children, but a spirit remains that will not be snuffed out.

We are battling alcoholism, drug and solvent abuse, family dysfunction, homophobia, incest, suicides, and gangs. Indigenous people on average die younger and suffer a greater occurrence of preventable diseases like Tuberculosis and diabetes, and are less educated and more likely to be incarcerated than our non-Indigenous brothers and sisters. This is of course no coincidence; rather it is the devastating result of centuries of failed social experiments.

I am here to today to talk about the task of putting our lives back together.

A great leader of the Coast Salish people in British Columbia Canada, Chief Dan George once said:

Oh, God! Like the Thunderbird of old I shall rise again out of the sea; I shall grab the instruments of the white man's success---his education, his skills, and with these new tools I shall build my race into the proudest segment of your society.

I shall see our young braves and our chiefs sitting in the houses of law and government, ruling and being ruled by the knowledge and freedom of our great land. So shall we shatter the barriers of our isolation. So shall the next hundred years be the greatest and proudest in the proud history of our tribes and nations.

He spoke those words more than 40 years ago, and it was with great pride this year that I watched his grandson, Chief Justin George of the Tsleil-Waututh First Nation, welcome the world as a head-of-state and member of the Four Host First Nations at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, British Colombia.

It is the first time that the International Olympic Committee has recognized Indigenous Nations as equal partners.

Governments of the world are beginning to see the value of working with Indigenous peoples. They are learning from experience that dictating to us doesn't work.

I am encouraged that this week New Zealand changed its position on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, and the United States has announced a review of its position. I congratulate President Obama and Prime Minister Key.

The province of Manitoba was also pleased to hear the Government of Canada will be taking steps to endorse the Declaration.

And I am hopeful they will partner with the province of Manitoba to make Winnipeg the home of the first ever gathering of the World Indigenous Nations Games in 2012.

These games are an event by Indigenous people - the first time in our history where we can put our hearts and hands together with pride and celebrate our cultures and identities.

And I want to take this time to acknowledge the vision and leadership of Dr. Willie Littlechild, who has been working toward this goal more than 30 years.

He and I believe that sport is powerful a unifying force.

It can awaken a powerful force inside of us that can be focused in positive ways for ourselves and our communities.

We saw it at work first in the residential schools, where it provided us an escape from the cruelty of the system. Today it is at work in some of Canada's poorest communities. In remote northern

Canadian communities like Shamattawa, kids can find the joy of being kids by playing sports. It is often their only reprieve from their daily reality of family dysfunction, overcrowded homes and hunger.

The government of Manitoba has committed \$3.5 million to make the World Indigenous Nations Games a reality, and we are working hard to bring other partners on board. I encourage you to support us in this endeavor.

It is not the first time our government has worked with Aboriginal peoples to celebrate indigenous culture and identity. In 2002 we hosted the North American Indigenous Games, bringing thousands of young people together in the spirit of friendly competition. And last year we hosted our fourth annual Manito Ahbee Festival - a festival for all nations. Indigenous artists from across the Turtle Island joined with us to share their song and dance, and to sound our grand-father the Drum.

In many indigenous cultures, the youth and the elders are the most sacred elements of society. And our youth are the fastest growing segment of any demographic group.

The vision of World Indigenous Nations Games is to provide our youth with a legacy and a future. On behalf of the WIN Sport board and the Government of Manitoba, I invite you to share in this celebration of sport, and culture -- and of life.

Join with us in 2012 at the centre of North America in Manitoba, or as my people call it -- Manito Ahbee, "the place where the spirit sits."

Ekosani

Hai-Hai

Merci bien.

Thank-you very much.