



Flowers, children's shoes and other items rest at a memorial at the Eternal flame on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on Tuesday, June 1, 2021, in recognition of discovery of children's remains at the site of a former residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia. (The Canadian Press via AP/Sean Kilpatrick)

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Canada's Indigenous services minister said June 2 that Pope Francis needs to issue a formal apology for the role the Catholic Church played in Canada's residential school system, days after the remains of 215 children were located at what was once the country's largest such school.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government also pledged again to support efforts to find more unmarked graves at the former residential schools for Indigenous students - institutions that held Indigenous children taken from families across the nation.

Chief Rosanne Casimir of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation in British Columbia has said the remains of 215 children were confirmed last month at the school in Kamloops, British Columbia, with the help of ground-penetrating radar. So far none has been excavated.

The Kamloops Indian Residential School was Canada's largest such facility and was operated by the Roman Catholic Church between 1890 and 1969 before the federal government took it over as a day school until 1978, when it was closed. Nearly three-quarters of the 130 schools were run by Catholic missionary congregations.

A papal apology was one of the 94 recommendations made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was set up as part of a government apology and settlement over the schools, and Trudeau personally asked the pope to consider such a gesture during a visit to the Vatican in 2017.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops announced in 2018 that the pope could not personally apologize for residential schools, even though he has not shied away from recognizing injustices faced by Indigenous people around the world.

"I think it is shameful that it hasn't been done to date," Indigenous Services Minister Marc Miller said.

"There is a responsibility that lies squarely on the shoulders" on the Catholic bishops of Canada, he added.

Indigenous Relations Minister Carolyn Bennett added that an apology by the Pope would help those who suffered heal.

"They want to hear the Pope apologize," she said.

Trudeau said in 2018 he was disappointed by the Catholic church's decision.



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau speaks during a debate about the discovery of remains of 215 children at the site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School, in the House of Commons, in Ottawa, Ontario, Tuesday, June 1, 2021. (The Canadian Press via AP/Adrian Wyld)

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops didn't immediately respond to a message seeking comment for the latest call for a formal public apology by the Pope.

Former Pope Benedict met with a group of former students and victims in 2009 and told them of his "personal anguish" over their suffering, Phil Fontaine, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, said at the time.

From the 19th century until the 1970s, more than 150,000 First Nations children were required to attend state-funded Christian schools as part of a program to assimilate them into Canadian society. They were forced to convert to Christianity and not allowed to speak their native languages. Many were beaten and verbally abused, and up to 6,000 are said to have died.

The Canadian government apologized in Parliament in 2008 and admitted that physical and sexual abuse in the schools was rampant. Many students recalled being beaten for speaking their languages. They also lost touch with their parents and customs.

The archbishop of Vancouver apologized on June 2.

"I am writing to express my deep apology and profound condolences to the families and communities that have been devastated by this horrific news," Archbishop Michael Miller tweeted. "The Church was unquestionably wrong in implementing a government colonialist policy which resulted in devastation for children, families and communities."

First Nations leaders are calling for an examination of other former residential schools.

Trudeau's ministers said the government will help preserve gravesites and search for potential unmarked burial grounds at other former residential schools. But Trudeau and his ministers have stressed need for Indigenous communities to decide for themselves how they want to proceed.

"We will be there to support every community that wants to do this work," Bennett said.

The government previously announced \$27 million Canadian (US\$22 million) for the effort. Bennett called that a first step.

"I know people are eager for answers but we do have to respect the privacy and mourning period of those communities that are collecting their thoughts and putting together protocols on how to honor these children," Miller said.

Indigenous leaders plan to bring in forensics experts to identify and repatriate the remains of the children found buried on the Kamloops site. Perry Bellegarde, chief of the Assembly of First Nations, spoke with Trudeau this week and urged him to work with First Nations "to find all the unmarked graves of our stolen children."

Murray Sinclair, the former chair of the reconciliation commission, said more sites will be found.

"We know there are lots of sites similar to Kamloops that are going to come to light in the future. We need to begin to prepare ourselves for that," Sinclair said.

The reconciliation commission has records of at least 51 children dying at the school between 1915 and 1963. It identified about 3,200 confirmed deaths at schools throughout Canada, but noted the schools did not record the cause of death in almost half of them.

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