

## **First Nations Ink Accord**

By Jean Compton

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A who's who of B.C. First Nations gathered at the Snuneymuxw longhouse Saturday to speak with a common voice.

They want treaty negotiations to move forward in a meaningful way or they are willing to assert established rights, which they say could put the economy at risk.

Chiefs, elders and representatives from over 40 First Nations from across British Columbia representing 14 treaty tables came together to give a strong message that they are united, and to sign a protocol agreement in a traditional ceremony.

Spokesmen Robert Morales, Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group chief negotiator, and Chief Robert Louie of the Westbank First Nation spoke with impassioned voices at a news conference as they outlined the six key shared areas of major concern: certainty, constitutional status of treaty lands, governance, co-management of lands and resources, fiscal relations and taxation, and fisheries.

"Negotiations have stalled primarily because the governments of Canada and B.C. have predetermined outcomes," said Morales. He said the protocol is a way to show that the parties are united in their energies towards being able to achieve lasting and sustainable treaties.

"We hope we can enter into conciliatory, cooperative negotiations," said Morales. "If negotiations are not successful, we will begin to become much more assertive in the rights we have."

"We have rights recognized by the Supreme Court of Canada. We have not fully implemented those rights," said Morales.

Chief Robert Louie was even more adamant. "We must be very, very assertive. Every business must know there is unsettled treaties. Notice is given to the prime minister and the premier, industry and the public that we wish to settle for fair terms," he said. "We will not give up the jurisdiction of our land. We have inherent rights that must be recognized and negotiations must be fair to all," said Louie.

"We must have recognition of our Aboriginal rights. This is a new beginning. I am happy to see the power and strength collected in this room," said Louie to enthusiastic applause.

He predicts they will soon have unanimous support of all First Nations in the province. When asked if stalled negotiations could affect the 2010 Olympics, Morales said he hoped they would have made significant progress by then.

Cheminus First Nation elders Willie Seymour and Ray Harris acted as spokespeople for the chiefs.

Seymour was part of the 1992 agreement of 19 principles with then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and Premier Mike Harcourt. Since then an estimated one billion dollars has been spent without a single treaty signed.

Seymour said several treaties that are about to be signed would not act as templates for the following treaty tables.

The signing ceremony in the longhouse followed tradition, recognizing all present and asking them to witness the signing, before the 14 leaders, many in traditional regalia, came forward and signed the protocol agreement. Afterwards, Chief Terry Sampson of the Chemainus First Nation expressed optimism. "It's been a long time coming. It's been talked about, but now we have walked the talk," said Sampson.

He looks forward to a time when everyone is treated the same way. "The ball's in their court now," he said. "I think about playing sports and how we shook hands after a tough game. "Hopefully the mayors and governments of B.C. and Canada will be here again soon. Not in 100 years, but more like 100 days," he said.

The only federal or provincial politicians to attend the signing ceremony were Vancouver Island North NDP MP Catherine Bell, and Nanaimo NDP MLA Leonard Krog. Nanaimo City Councillors Bill Holdom and Diane Brennan were also present.

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