

First Nations Frustrated by Treaty Delays

By Robert Barron
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ACTION: Continued stalling of talks could lead to blockades, suggests B.C. chief

Frustration was as thick as the smoke from the ceremonial fires inside the Snuneymuxw First Nation's longhouse in Cedar on Saturday morning.

Snuneymuxw Chief Viola Wyse was joined by representatives from 43 of B.C.'s First Nations, who gathered to sign a unity protocol agreement on treaty negotiations.

Spokesman Robert Morales said the agreement is an attempt to break the impasse on treaty negotiations between many First Nations and the provincial and federal governments and "remove the barriers that have stalled negotiations at many treaty tables across the province."

"We must recognize that negotiations are about reconciliation," said Morales, chairman of the First Nations summit chief negotiators.

"However, for the past 14 years, the governments have come to the table with a longer and longer list of items they say are non- negotiable.

"We are prepared to work with the governments to find ways to reinvigorate their policies and mandates, but we need solutions that work for everyone."

Wyse said the delays by the senior levels of government cannot continue.

"There's been no real positive negotiations for years, so we offered to host this event because negotiating a fair treaty is one of the most important things we will ever do in our lifetime," she said.

Morales said the intent of the agreement is to set out common principles among the First Nations in a number of areas. Principles include certainty that aboriginal rights won't be taken away in negotiations and statements regarding the constitutional status of treaty lands, governance, co-management of traditional territories, taxation and fisheries.

Robert Louie, chief of the Westbank First Nation, said the signing of the agreement puts governments on notice that the First Nations want to settle negotiations with fair terms for everybody and "not under mandated conditions forced down our throats."

"It has to be understood how serious an issue this is for us if it is not resolved," he said. "I don't know if this could lead to blockades of roads and railways if it's not resolved, but we feel strong enough about this to go that far if need be."

Asked if the First Nations signing the accord Saturday (representing about 25% of the bands currently negotiating treaties in the province) would be prepared to disrupt the 2010 Olympics if they are still not satisfied with the status of the negotiations by then, Morales said it's not their intent to disrupt anything.

"Our objective is to try and establish relationships that have respect, but if the frustrations continue to build, we don't know what will happen," he said.

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[Illustration]

Colour Photo: Robert Barron, Daily News / Ellen White, an elder from the Snuneymuxw First Nation, leads prayers before the signing of the protocol agreement between more than 40 First Nations in Nanaimo on Saturday.