

Treaty Terms Must Change: Natives

By Ian Bailey
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B.C. risks native protests, uncertainty and a black mark on its reputation before the 2010 Olympics -- all due to flaws in the present treaty process, natives are warning.

Chiefs, elders and representatives of more than 40 native communities yesterday signed a "unity protocol" in Nanaimo to highlight their concerns about treaty positions taken by Ottawa and Victoria that they say work against them.

The groups said that First Nations communities are losing patience with the situation that they say has confounded a \$1-billion effort, under way since the early 1990s, to get treaties signed.

"It's not our intent to be disruptive, but frustrations can build and we don't know what will happen," said Robert Morales, chair of the First Nations Summit Chief Negotiators.

Chief Robert Louie of Westbank said the public should understand how serious the issue is.

"Does that mean blockading of roads, does that mean handing [out] of pamphlets, does that mean blockading of railways? I don't know if it will go that far, but the issue is strong enough to go that far if need be," he said.

The leaders say they are concerned about six key issues: certainty, the constitutional status of treaty lands, governance, co-management throughout traditional territories, fiscal relations and taxation, and fisheries.

A lack of flexibility by governments in these areas is "leading to impasses" and blocking progress on negotiated treaties, the two said.

"Most of us, if not all of us, have now hit the wall on many of these key issues we are now bringing forward, and are unable to make progress," said Morales.

Louie agreed.

"The vast majority of our peoples in this land cannot settle under the mandated terms of government, and that must change," he said.

"Notice is given to the prime minister, to the premier, to the government, to industry, to the general public that we wish to settle and wish to have fair terms."

Louie said turmoil around the situation could damage B.C.'s reputation in the lead-up to the 2010 Olympic Games.

"We certainly would not want to see a situation where we have a continuing dissatisfaction, a continuing situation of frustration with our communities leading up to that world event where British Columbia will be put on the world stage," he said.

Provincial Aboriginal Relations Minister Mike de Jong said he could understand the frustration of groups in Nanaimo yesterday, but insisted prospects are good for additional treaties soon.

"I hesitate after 15 years to urge anyone to be patient," he said. "I am sympathetic to the frustration that says this is taking an awfully long time."

Both Morales and Louie were speaking for angry communities during a ceremony in Nanaimo that drew representatives of such First Nations as the Ditidaht First Nation, Hamatla Treaty Society, Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group and Hupacasath First Nation.

Their warning came, ironically, as Premier Gordon Campbell and federal Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice prepare to meet today in Prince George for the first initialing ceremony of a treaty since a 1998 deal affecting the Nisga'a in northeastern B.C.

That deal involves the 315-member Lheidl T'enneh Band. It is the first treaty signed under a process that has been under way in B.C. for 15 years and is separate from the route that led to the Nisga'a deal.

The B.C. government announced an agreement in principle yesterday to lead to a future treaty with the In-SHUCK-ch Nation, representing 907 Douglas First Nation members in the Lillooet River Valley.

Yesterday's announcement involved about 46 bands, but others are expected to back the possible protests, organizers of the declaration said.

There are 45 negotiating tables at work now representing 120 First Nations communities out of about 200 in B.C.