

First Nations Talks 'Hit a Wall': 40 Groups Unite to Speed Up Their Negotiations as Several Treaty Breakthroughs Come to the Fore

By Carolyn Heiman
Times Colonist, Sunday, October 29, 2006

More than 40 First Nations groups, including several from Vancouver Island, have banded together to take a common negotiating position on six troublesome areas they say are creating an impasse on their treaty negotiations.

Robert Morales, spokesman for the group and a chief negotiator with the First Nations summit, said yesterday that negotiations have "hit a wall" and the protocol agreement signed in Nanaimo is aimed at speeding up negotiations with their groups.

The stance was taken as several significant treaty developments materialized in other parts of the province. Today the final agreement is being initialled with the Lheidli T'enneh First Nations in Prince George with Premier Gordon Campbell and Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice in attendance. It will be the first initialling under the new provincial treaty process set up following the 1998 Nisga'a deal in northeastern B.C. If ratified, the Lheidli T'enneh could have a treaty in about a year.

Meanwhile, the province and the In-SHUCK-ch Nation yesterday announced signing an agreement in principle that lays the foundation for a future treaty in the Lillooet River Valley.

However, at the Nanaimo news conference Westbank First Nation chief Robert Louie had tough words about other negotiations that don't seem to be progressing. He said the 40 united First Nations group "will not have a treaty forced down our throats." A fair settlement will recognize aboriginal rights and title, he said.

Louie stopped short of saying First Nations involved in the agreement would start blockading to make their point, but he said "we must be very assertive."

Louie said he hoped significant progress was made on treaty negotiations before 2010 when B.C. will be on the world stage for the Olympics.

Morales said the protocol agreement, called the Unity Protocol, represents about a quarter of First Nations groups at tables.

He predicted others would join them as internal issues get worked out. The agreement covers a range of issues from governance to taxation. The group is opposed to the removal of reserve status of First Nations land and giving up tax-exemption status and aboriginal fishing rights.

B.C. Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation Mike de Jong said he is sympathetic "to any expression of frustration that it is taking so long to get final agreements."

But de Jong said he expected several other agreements to come into place before Christmas and four or five in the next year. "It might be a tad early to refer to it as a momentum" but perhaps in a few months that might apply, he said.

De Jong said negotiators have been given a mandate along with a consistent set of instructions for negotiations.

"Fitting those consistent mandates at individual tables can create challenges," he said.

Louie said the mandated terms won't work for most First Nations groups.

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