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Institutionalized racism still plagues Canada natives: Edward Corrigan

Interview with Edward Corrigan, an international lawyer from London, Ontario

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The indigenous people in Canada continue to suffer under systemic and institutionalized racial discrimination, an international lawyer tells Press TV.

This comes as Canadian activists and protesters have held demonstrations in Ottawa, and several other cities to call for the protection of First Nations' rights.

Press TV has conducted an interview with Edward Corrigan, an international lawyer from London, Ontario, to further discuss the issue. The following is a rough transcription of the interview.

Press TV: It is quite clear that the conditions of the First Nations people are not idealistic. They have been undermined and marginalized for years. Do you think there's a political will from Ottawa to correct the mistakes of the past?

Corrigan: Unfortunately, at the present time, even Harper's government, the conservative government, is very right-wing and I don't think they're open to hearing the complaints and grievances of the Native population. The conservatives generally take a hostile view to it.

Some of the other parties recognize that we've done terrible things in the past and have to do much better.

I don't see the conservatives bending. In fact, their constituency is quite hostile to Native interests, and tend to sort of ignore them and trample on Native rights. That's a big part of their political feedback.

It's unfortunate but it's the minority in Canada and, of course, they have the majority government at the present time.

Press TV: Mr. Corrigan, for those of our viewers who are not familiar with the plight of the First Nations in Canada, just walk us through their conditions throughout the Harper government's mandate as far as how they have been treated regarding the protection of their land, property and investment within their social structures.

Corrigan: Unfortunately, the real problem in the history goes back over 100 years, even longer. Natives have suffered systemic and institutionalized racial discrimination in this country.

Up until for example 1960, they didn't have the right to vote...in fact, it was made illegal for Indians to hire lawyers to defend their rights. And if an Indian did manage to come through the

educational system to become a lawyer or whatever, they would lose their status as an Indian.

There was incredible pressure on them. In fact, there was a whole residential school system setup in the early 1920s to take the Indian children and to basically Westernize them, to remove any indication of Indian. If they spoke their native language, they were punished.

There was notorious physical abuse and sexual abuse, and an attempt to tear their children away from the culture, their communities, their families, and to recreate them in sort of a Western, English Anglo-Saxon sort of model.

It was a big disaster but it was very traumatic. In fact, the death rate of the schools was very high. Some of the schools, the death rate was as high as 25 percent. They were grossly under-funded. There was a chronic lack of food - different things. There was a real disaster.

Now, there's been lots of lawsuits for the Natives for suing the churches and other groups that were setting up these residential schools. There's an admission that it was a terrible time for the Natives.

Up to the current period, the institutionalized racism still is there. There's a lot of social stigma even though people, the white settlers and the defendants who'd be very apologetic for what they did, they sort of transformed their hostility and racism. What it was is we've destroyed the cultural anchors for these communities, and replaced them with nothing.

We took them off their native land. Threw them on reserves which generally were land which nobody else wanted. And if somehow we wanted them, we'd kick them off the land... Their tradition has been basically very much undermined if not destroyed as is their way of life and their tradition.

Press TV: Right now, Theresa Spence who's on a hunger strike, has demanded that she wants to meet with Prime Minister Steven Harper and also the Governor-General. The Governor-General is a representative of the Queen of England in Canada. The role is largely symbolic but it does seem that the Governor-General can have some sort of an influence on the decision making process. Do you think a meeting with the Governor-General can help?

Corrigan: The Governor-General is symbolic in Canada right now; but in the past, historically, it was the Natives' made the agreements with the British crown in England. It's a way of sort of leap-frogging over the Prime Minister, and reestablishing a lot of the treaties and agreements.

In fact, they were made with the British crown before the existence of Canada or certainly before Canada became a fully independent state. There's various stages. Some people say that it wasn't until 1982 that we repatriated the British North American Act that Canada became really a fully independent state.

There's a message there that a lot of the treaties and agreements, which have been held up by the Supreme Court, in fact were negotiated by the British crown before the existence of Canada itself. So that's the message they're sending.

There were times that the Native Indians in Canada and even in the United States preferred to deal with the far-off British crown than the local government authorities and the settlers who were trying to steal their land. So, there's incredible symbolic significance in that.

In terms of Harper, they're not funding the reserves. The educational system, the healthcare in most of the reserves is horrible. The mortality rate, 80 percent of children live below the poverty level.

[Under] Harper's, there's rumors going on, they're going to take away any political power that the Native band councils have and take it to the government, and basically have no independent state...The Natives are reacting against that because it would be as a threat on their economy and also on their political power.

There are problems. The solution to the problem is not taking away power from people. You're supposed to give power and help them...give them the things they do, and work with them.

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