

Continued Mass Incarceration of Indigenous Peoples During COVID-19 Creating Dangerous Health Risks

Saskatoon, SK (December 22nd, 2020) – The following statement was released by Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) National Vice-Chief Kim Beaudin:

The Government of Canada is failing to prevent the spread of COVID-19 inside Canada's Federal penitentiaries. After many months of inaction and a new rise cases across penitentiaries in several Provinces, it is unacceptable to allow the status quo to continue.

During the first wave of the pandemic, we witnessed significant outbreaks at Mission Institution in British Columbia, several penitentiaries in Quebec, and Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, Ontario. Prison experts and prisoner advocates said then that the Federal government needed to release nonviolent offenders from its penitentiaries to limit COVID-19 infections amongst prisoners, staff members, and their communities.

They also called for significantly more resources to perform rapid testing to maintain programming, volunteer initiatives, and visits from loved ones, along with putting in place video visiting and free phone calls commensurate to the demand to maintain life lines that are critical to the safety of our communities; to which most imprisoned people will eventually return. Calls for access to PPE, cleaning supplies, healthy food, and other basic necessities were also made. These reasonable demands have largely fallen on deaf ears, despite claims of understanding and claims that appropriate action has been taken.

Correctional Service Canada, the Parole Board of Canada and Federal Cabinet had five months where there were no reported COVID-19 cases linked to penitentiaries to properly prepare for the second wave. This was time to work in concert to release as many nonviolent prisoners as is safely possible with community supports where needed. Now that outbreaks are running rampant at Stony Mountain Institution north of Winnipeg, Saskatchewan Penitentiary in Prince Albert, as well as Joyceville Institution in Kingston (and other Ontario penitentiaries that Joyceville prisoners were transferred to), Prime Minister Justin Trudeau must take control of this crisis and preserve the health and safety of federal prisoners, prison staff, and our communities

It is well-known that Indigenous Peoples are mass-incarcerated in Canada. Promises to address this legacy of the intergenerational trauma Indigenous Peoples have endured as the result of genocidal policies and practices enacted by the Federal government over several generations. Commitments to take the necessary measures to end this contemporary manifestation of colonialism have been made, but little has been done.

On behalf of my people, I am demanding the Government of Canada release as many nonviolent prisoners as possible through the many tools that exist to do so. I also urge that those kept caged in Canada's colonial Federal penitentiaries be given access to the programs, contact with loved ones and volunteers, and supplies required to come out of this crisis alive. Inaction will signal to Indigenous Peoples that our lives do not matter and that the Federal government remains unable to move past colonialist legacies.

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