

More than 180 unmarked graves found at another Canadian residential school

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Solar lights and flags now mark the spots where 751 unmarked graves were recently discovered at the site of the former Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan [Geoff Robins/AFP]

Ottawa, June 30 (RHC)-- An Indigenous community in western Canada has found 182 unmarked graves near a former boarding school for Indigenous children, the latest such discovery in recent weeks.

The Lower Kootenay Band said that experts used ground penetrating radar mapping to locate what are believed to be the remains of Indigenous children between the ages of seven and 15 at St Eugene's Mission School near Cranbrook, British Columbia.

The institution, which Indigenous children were forced to attend in a state effort to assimilate them into Canadian society, was run by the Catholic Church and operated from 1890 until 1970, according to the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre.

The search of the grounds began last year, the band said in a statement, and the children are believed to be members of bands of the Ktunaxa Nation, which includes the Lower Kootenay and other neighbouring Indigenous communities.

"You can never fully prepare for something like this," said Chief Jason Louie of the Lower Kootenay Band, as reported by CBC News.

Hundreds of unmarked graves have been uncovered in at least three other residential schools in Canada in recent weeks, plunging Indigenous communities that had known for decades about deaths at the institutions into a sense of renewed grief and anguish.

Canada's residential school system operated from the late 1800s until the 1990s. It was part of a wider colonial project that aimed to take over Indigenous lands and forcibly assimilate First Nation, Metis and Inuit children. Various churches, including most notably the Roman Catholic Church, ran at least 139 residential schools across Canada, and thousands of Indigenous children are believed to have died while attending the institutions.

Late last month, 215 Indigenous children's remains were found at Kamloops Indian Residential School in BC, while as many as 751 unmarked graves were discovered at Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan last week.

Chief Jennifer Bone of Sioux Valley Dakota Nation, in the central province of Manitoba, also said this month that the community believes 104 potential graves exist in three cemeteries at the site of the Brandon Residential School.

The discoveries have led to growing calls for accountability from the federal government and the Catholic Church.

Indigenous leaders are demanding an apology from Pope Francis and for the church to release all its records related to the institutions. They are also calling for adequate financial support to help fund searches on residential school grounds, for criminal charges to be laid against anyone found responsible for crimes committed, and for a thorough investigation to be launched.

Canadian parliament member Charlie Angus, of the opposition New Democratic Party, said on Wednesday that "the time has come for a coherent and independent investigation to gather the evidence of these crimes".

Meanwhile, the anguish of the latest discovery is being felt by Indigenous people across Canada. "My family all went there," Earl Einarson, a member of the Ktunaxa First Nation, posted on Twitter about the residential school near Cranbrook. "The shadow of that place still haunts our family. And now in that same shadow lie 182 who never did escape from its dark shadow."

According to the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre, "an Indian Agent reported in 1935 that, as a result of poor food, overwork, and sickness, he had to force parents to send their children" to St Eugene's Mission School.

“Despite a change in the principal, school attendance and runaways were ongoing problems. There were also recurring outbreaks of influenza, mumps, measles, chickenpox, and tuberculosis,” the centre said.

Many Indigenous community members also have asked that celebrations on Canada Day – a national holiday on July 1 – be cancelled in light of the unmarked grave discoveries. “As more and more of our children who did not return from the Residential Schools are discovered, I do not believe that this is a time for celebrating Canada,” said Walter Naveau, acting grand chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), which represents dozens of First Nations in northern Ontario.

“I hear people say that Canada is the greatest nation, but many choose not to acknowledge this country’s true history with Indigenous Peoples and the legacy that continues to this day,” Naveau said in a statement on Wednesday.

“Canada has moved on from the dark days of the Residential Schools, but our people have not. Many are still grieving, and many cannot grieve until they know what happened to their loved ones – the children who were taken away and never made it home.”

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