

U.S. Interior Secretary vows to unveil brutal history of Native American boarding schools

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File photo of a federally-operated Native American boarding school that sought to separate indigenous children from their families in efforts to eradicate their culture.

Washington, July 17 (RHC)-- The U.S. Interior Secretary has expressed her resolve to unveil as much history as possible about cruelties perpetrated within Native American boarding school system, which separated generations of children from their families in efforts to wipe out indigenous culture.

"We've had a very brutal and vicious history in this country," Deb Haaland admitted on Friday as quoted in a Reuters report, adding: "This is one piece of it. We're working our hearts out every single day to get (the investigation) to the point where it's more finished than unfinished."

Haaland, who is the first Native American woman to serve as a US cabinet secretary, further underlined in a phone interview that no single investigation can recover all that was lost during the brutal period of the US-based boarding schools.

The government-run "schools" operated from the early 1800s through the 1970s and served as centers of forced assimilation, with the stated goal of eradicating Native American culture.

The secretary said repairing what the boarding school system did means recovering what was lost: language, education, housing, healthcare and security through better law enforcement. "All of those things, we're working toward, and for me, if we can live up to those obligations, that will be justice," she said.

Haaland began a year-long listening tour last weekend to hear from survivors of boarding schools about the abuses they endured.

Elderly survivors of federally established US boarding schools for Native Americans recount widespread atrocities at the government-run institutions in a meeting with U.S. Interior Secretary. "That's important. For native folks who felt invisible for so many centuries, decades and years, having the opportunity to tell of their experiences with a cabinet member sitting right there, it helps them to get it out of their hearts and onto healing," she underlined.

Haaland released an initial report from the Interior Department's continuing probe into the history the boarding schools back in May, which included recommendations for funding programs to preserve Native American languages.

The U.S. government has never acknowledged how many children attended such schools, how many children died or went missing from them or even how many schools existed.

Conditions at former Indian boarding schools gained global attention last year when tribal leaders in Canada announced the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves of children at the sites of residential schools for indigenous children, as such institutions are known in Canada. Unlike the U.S., the report said, Canada carried out a full investigation into its schools via its Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Haaland, a former Democratic Party congresswoman from New Mexico, also co-authored a Congressional bill that would establish a Truth and Healing Commission, similar to one that was established in Canada in 2007 and issued its final report in 2015.

The United States has identified over 500 deaths at its boarding schools that for over a century sought to assimilate Native American children into white society.

According to the report, a version of Haaland's bill is still winding its way through Congress as she insists that its passage was critical to establishing an all-of-government approach to addressing a system Native Americans widely blame for creating multiple generations of essentially parentless children raised by abusive institutions, decimating family structures and healthy tribal culture.

The Congressional bill would also give a Truth and Healing Commission subpoena powers, which the Interior Department does not have for its own investigation, to force the churches and other institutions that often operated the boarding schools to turn over internal documents. "That would be a game changer," Haaland emphasized.

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