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**YOUTH, ELDERS CHALLENGE DEHCHO ASSEMBLY TO UNITE IN
NEGOTIATIONS PROCESS**

FORT SIMPSON, NT – June 26 -- From the spiritually moving fire-feeding ceremony this morning to the closing drum dance of the first day of the 15th annual Dehcho First Nations (DFN) Assembly, the emphasis of the leaders, elders and energetic youth was focused on one theme, “Defending the Homeland.”

Some 80 delegates from the Dehcho territory’s 10 communities, heard an unique refrain from the youth and elders’ pre-assembly conference not to let their message “fall on deaf ears.”

The message was one of despair and hope. Despair, as Felix Isiah, 26, of Fort Simpson reported, “because our young people are sick, our communities are disconnected, we too often fall into alcohol and drug abuse.” Hope was with the elders and the parents. “They have a choice: show us what it means to be Dene -- or turn on the TV,” Isiah softly told the DFN leaders and participants.

Reporting on the weekend’s conference on the sacred land near the confluence of the Laird and Mackenzie -- where 20 years ago Pope John Paul II met the Dehcho and supported their struggle for their land – Isiah called on the DFN leaders and people observing to “avoid the distractions of empty town life.” Instead he asked for a series of events where youth and elders could meet on the land.

And, in what has become almost a sub-theme of the four-day meeting, a demand to change and improve the educational curriculum in Dehcho schools, especially the use of the Slavey language.

Earlier, in his opening remarks, Grand Chief Herb Norwegian criticized the educational system in the North for its poor standard of schooling that sends “our young people out into the world, or south to higher education, with such a poor quality of learning that they are left far behind. The educators of this territory know what I mean and we demand that they explain this low standard of education inflicted on our people.”

Norwegian said residential schools and the territorial educational “almost destroyed our language, now it is time for our school system to be more serious about helping us to get it back.”

The grand chief and the other leaders vowed that the youth and elders’ pleas would not fall on deaf ears as they were challenged by the weekend meeting:

“We have to express our ‘bafflement’ about the lack of unity in our communities, in the lack of unity around our Dehcho Process of negotiation, the lack of support by some for the negotiators and leaders who are trying to achieve the goals our people have set to control our land and govern ourselves. The youth and elders don’t understand the conflicts we hear among some of our leaders,” Isaiah reported.

And, he ended as he began “don’t let our words to you fall on deaf ears.”

The youth and elders were much in evidence as the first day’s annual reports were received, leading up to the main agenda items of the Assembly which will start Wednesday morning: the update of the Dehcho Process, the negotiations with the federal and territorial government, land use planning, progress on a general Agreement-in-Principle and the negotiating team’s progress report. The agenda was expanded to give almost two days to go through its proposals in detail and to seek a further mandate from the DFN leadership.

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