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DEHCHO FIRST NATIONS INTERIM GRAND CHIEF'S TERM OF OFFICE EXTENDED

KAKISA LAKE, -- June 24 -- Gerald Antoine, for the past five months interim Grand Chief of the Dehcho First Nations, had his term of office as Grand Chief extended by the 16th Annual Assembly here until the normal term of office expires in mid-2009.

He accepted the mandate of the Assembly – chiefs, elders, delegates and Metis local representatives -- with one condition:

“You must start to work together seriously. We will work together, the office, the executive director and the Leadership, but all members and all chiefs and all Metis local presidents must also work united. We do have a government. It must be participation from now on of all of us.”

“I am honoured and committed to the task the Assembly has given me and I will work as hard and as carefully as I can for the next critical period,” he told the delegates, gathered in the arbour here.

Antoine had been appointed interim Grand Chief Feb. 8 by the DFH Leadership, following the dismissal of former Grand Chief Herb Norwegian by a special assembly in January. Antoine's interim term was due to expire at the Kakisa Assembly.

During a lengthy discussion of a committee report on election processes to examine whether future Grand Chief elections would be by Assembly or regionally, Antoine spoke emotionally on the demands that leadership makes on people, families, communities and especially the individual holding high positions of leadership.

Visibly moved, and referring often to his term as Grand Chief in 1993, Antoine said “I am not seeking this position, I am not here for life, I have things I want to do, I responsibilities to my family. But I have seen so many painful things in the last few months. We don't listen to each other, we don't speak straight to each other. We are not honest with each other. We lie to each other. We shouldn't do that. It is not the way of our people.”

Antoine paused for several minutes while a healing group gathered around him. The Assembly was totally silent. It was a powerful moment. Then he continued saying that “previous grand chiefs know how badly we treat each other...the way parents and kids treat each other... the way communities treat each other...we need to change that and improve that. It makes us afraid to speak out.

“We have to change these attitudes. It is easy to change policies but changing ourselves, changing people's attitudes is much more difficult.”

Referring to the recent apology by Prime Minister Stephen Harper to Aboriginal People for the atrocities of the residential school system, Antoine said the “impact of the schools “is still with us. It is not over, not for the victims, not for their children and not for their grandchildren. We make mistakes, we are very human but instead of accusing and blaming we have to learn from these mistakes and find people with skills to help us. We have to take responsibility for ourselves, not rely on Indian Affairs. Follow your heart.”

Antoine reminded the Assembly that its theme was “That’s Enough!”

Harper apologized but he will not put words into actions. He will not change policies towards land claims and comprehensive claims and the Dehcho Process. “The day after the apology, the chief negotiator for Canada told the Dehcho Process that he had talked to senior people in Ottawa and there was no change in policy towards our land and our Treaties because of the apology. It was business as usual.”

“We have to get over the residential school syndrome on our own. We have to move ahead and become the way we were meant to be by the Creator.”

A thunderous standing ovation greeted Antoine’s moving words. The meeting adjourned for the night. Next day, his mandate extension was unanimous.

In a related matter, after lengthy discussion a proposal that grand chief elections be done on a regional basis, was widely defeated. DFN will continue to elect the Grand Chief at the annual Assemblies for a three-year term.

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