



Feminists Deliver's statement in response to Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada's Hiring of International Group to Advise on Unmarked Graves

Feminists Deliver is deeply concerned by the Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC) decision¹ to hire an international organization to advise on issues surrounding unmarked gravesites near former residential schools that were run by the colonial state of Canada.

On February 17, CIRNAC announced the signing of a Technical Arrangement² between the Government of Canada and the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP).

Under the Technical Arrangement, CIRNAC will “provide approximately \$2 million to the ICMP, who will conduct a cross-country outreach and engagement campaign with Indigenous communities that wish to explore options for the identification and repatriation of human remains from unmarked burial sites associated with former residential schools.”

This is a grave failure by Canada that, once again, is being paternalistic and white supremacist in how it treats Indigenous Peoples and how they have been leading the work in this area for a long time.

In July 2022, CIRNAC and the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR), announced the establishment of the National Advisory Committee on Residential Schools Missing Children and Unmarked Burials to ensure Indigenous communities have access to independent, trusted and expert information in their efforts to identify, locate, and commemorate their missing children.

We urge Canada to do a more meaningful engagement process that is led by this Committee that centres the voices and experiences of the survivors and cares for their emotional, mental, spiritual, and cultural needs in the process.

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/crown-indigenous-relations-northern-affairs/news/2023/02/international-commission-on-missing-persons-to-undertake-outreach-and-engagement-sessions-with-indigenous-communities-on-unmarked-burial-sites.html>

² <https://www.icmp.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Technical-Arrangement.pdf>

We also urge Canada to disburse these funds directly to the Indigenous communities doing this work in their communities. This \$2 million contract with an international organization is a serious misuse of funds.

This work and the engagement process associated with it is extremely sensitive and triggering and must be led by those who have been directly impacted by it. The survivors of Canada's residential schools system must be at the heart of this work.

We are extremely worried that involving a non-Indigenous organization will cause further harm. This decision is rooted in white supremacy and the repercussions will further uphold it.

The federal government may have a mandate to follow through the Calls to Action of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, but this work must be independent of the federal government given that it created and funded the church-run residential school system.

Ottawa is once again undermining the trust of Indigenous-led groups and communities. This decision is not led by Indigenous communities and is condescending to their work and lived experiences. It ignores the historical (and current) relationship between Indigenous communities and Canada that is entrenched in white supremacy, colonialism, and racism.

A decision made on behalf of Indigenous communities once again reinforces the fact that Canada continues to act for them and about them but without them.

Indigenous organizations and groups have also expressed their issues with this deal.

"We are uncomfortable with the fact that Canada did not follow the recommendations of the jointly appointed Indigenous experts that are just beginning their work. Is the federal government impatient to close this dark chapter by seeking to outsource reconciliation?" asks Anishinabek Nation Grand Council Chief Niganobe.³

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation also expressed its concern.

"There has been a shocking lack of transparency and clarity around Canada's decision to hire the ICMP. This is profoundly unfair and harmful to Survivors and communities. Unfortunately, actually seeing the terms of this agreement has only raised more questions," said NCTR Executive Director Stephanie Scott.⁴

³ <https://anishinabeknews.ca/2023/02/23/anishinabek-nation-trusts-indigenous-survivors-communities-and-experts-to-guide-unmarked-burial-searches-regardless-of-federal-deal-with-international-group/>

⁴ <https://nctr.ca/federal-agreement-with-international-agency-a-worrying-misstep/>

The technical agreement confirms that the final report will be due to the federal government by mid-June, with federal officials allowed to comment on drafts.

The contract also mentions that Indigenous facilitators will be hired to be present at the discussions and meet the "spiritual and ceremonial" needs of participants throughout the process. This process does not take a trauma-informed approach and causes further harm to Indigenous communities and survivors.

The contract also fails to recognize the key role that survivors must play and does not mention the importance of the work of the Committee, nor an intention to work with it, as well as with the special independent interlocutor, Kimberly Murray, who was also appointed to work on the matter.

Murray has also expressed her criticism for the contract, saying "It's very controlled by CIRNAC"

The federal government will also supply the ICMP with a predetermined format and review the draft report. The commission will then provide its final report by June 15, 2023.

We express concern over the fact that an international group lacks the knowledge and awareness of Canada's residential school system, and the absence of Indigenous Peoples points to a lack of culturally safe practices and procedures needed for something so important and sensitive.

We are also concerned that the ICMP lacks the expertise about Indigenous rights, sovereignty, self-determination, and cultural protocols.

This contract and the process by which Canada is undertaking this work is retraumatizing for Indigenous People and survivors, it undermines trust, and is extremely disrespectful. The supervision and approval of the final report by the federal government is a power-hoarding tactic that reeks of paternalism and white supremacy.

Canada funded, administered, and perpetrated these genocides under the guise of its residential school system. As such, agreement is a huge conflict for them, and legally, ethically, and morally, they should not be meddling in the investigations of the murders of the children it committed.

The Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program has a hotline to help residential school survivors and their relatives suffering trauma invoked by the recall of past abuse. The number is 1-866-925-4419.