

# NATIONAL POST

Thursday, April 17, 2008

## Natives could protest 2010 Olympics, says Chief Fontaine

**Bal Brach, Canwest News Service**



Mikael Kjellstrom/Canwest News Service

OTTAWA -- Canadian native groups might highlight the "desperate conditions" in their communities with protests during Vancouver's 2010 Olympics similar to this year's pro-Tibet demonstrations, First Nations leader Phil Fontaine warned Thursday.

This despite a memorandum of understanding with Vancouver's Olympics Committee (VANOC) signed by Mr. Fontaine and the Four Host First Nations last summer.

"What that speaks to is the desperate situation in our communities," said MR. Fontaine, Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations. "We find the Tibet situation compelling. The Tibetans are disenfranchised people. The situation here is similar, but it's different in this sense - the poverty we're talking about exists in Canada's own backyard.

"It's OK to express outrage with the Chinese government's position against Tibet, but [Canadians] should be just as outraged, if not more so . . . with what is being done to First Nations here."

Tibet protesters have made international headlines with their demonstrations, by interfering with the international Olympic torch relay and calling on countries to boycott the opening ceremonies.

"I would hope that we would not be forced to take disruptive measures," Mr. Fontaine told CBC Thursday. "I am confident and optimistic that won't be necessary. I personally am a big supporter of the 2010 Olympics. The Assembly of First Nations has expressed formally it's support for the 2010 Olympics."

In a memorandum of understanding signed July 12, 2007, the Four Host First Nations and the Assembly of First Nations agreed to work together with the organizing committee to "ensure successful 2010 Winter games and extend opportunities to participate in the 2010 Winter Games beyond the FHFNS (Four Host First Nations Society) to other First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples across Canada," according to the document obtained by Canwest News Service.

The agreement is signed by Mr. Fontaine, five other host nation members, and Vancouver Organizing Committee executive David Guscott.

Squamish First Nation Chief Bill Williams, whose signature is also on the document, said his band has agreed to work with the organizing committee.

However, that did not mean members of his nation would not be protesting.

"There will be some level of protest and I hope so too," he said. "We are going to be working with VANOC, but we have 3,500 members and not all want to be part of the Olympics. They want to talk about the children and the hardships in the community and they have the full right to do that."

Mr. Williams said First Nations across Canada have the highest attributes in all the worst life quality scenarios.

"We have the highest people incarcerated, the highest rate of children dropping out of schools, the highest rate of children in the child-care system and I could go on and on," Mr. Williams said.

Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl said the prospect of First Nations protesting the Olympics is "a little odd to me."

"We have an excellent working relationship with the four host nations that are in the Olympic territory," he said.

Mr. Strahl said the federal and provincial governments have been working closely with First Nations to make certain they benefit economically from the Games, and "for the first time ever" indigenous people will have a say in how the ceremonies are conducted.

"It's going very well and it's going to be an exciting Olympics for First Nations, not just from the area but from across Canada," said Mr. Strahl.

David Hurford, director of communications for Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan, said the mayor met with Mr. Fontaine this past summer to talk about the opportunities for First Nations with 2010.

"We've certainly offered an ongoing dialogue with him. We have a lot of respect for the national chief," said Mr. Hurford.

He added protests around the Olympics aren't unprecedented.

"There are a number of groups that are talking about using the Games as a catalyst to make a point on an issue that they care about. I think that's to be expected and in a country like Canada people are free to do that."

*With files from Winnipeg Free Press*