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PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

The Ahiarmiut Relocation Society is pleased to confirm that the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, the Honourable Carolyn Bennett, will be attending in Arviat, Nunavut for the purpose of rendering the Government of Canada's apology for the forced relocations of the Ahiarmiut between 1949 and 1959.

David Serkoak started the fight for recognition, reconciliation and compensation in 1992 by forming a Society to represent the interests of the Ahiarmiut.

Starting in 1949, consistent with government policy across Northern Canada, the Government of Canada in collaboration with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and various commercial operations compelled the Ahiarmiut to relocate multiple times in the coming decade. The forced relocations were accomplished through a series of broken promises, abuse of government privilege and power, misinformation, coercion and force. It will be left for historians and academics to arbitrate the real reasons why the Ahiarmiut were relocated but certainly contributing to the decision to relocate were governmental priorities in "settling" the itinerant groups who had for time immemorial resided in northern Canada without regard to the well-being and history of the people affected. The Ahiarmiut were moved for commercial purposes, administrative purposes and for other reasons never actually connected to the needs and aspirations of the group. The relocations resulted in malnutrition, starvation and many deaths.

The Government of Canada is expected to finally acknowledge their malfeasance towards the Ahiarmiut, have paid compensation and has promised an apology to take place in Arviat, Nunavut on January 22, 2019

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David Serkoak looks on the decades-old struggle with his usual calm reflection:

“Some days I wanted to give up but then the images of our elders and their struggles to keep themselves and us alive spurred me on. I never really doubted that this day would come but knowing that it is a date certain and at a senior Minister of the Crown will be offering its apology in our territory is vindication not just for me but for my family and our ancestors. The Europeans came to our traditional land with little or no respect for the people who already lived here. I see a better attitude in the Canadian government these days and the fact the Minister is willing to travel to us to offer her apology on behalf of the government is evidence of that fact. Canada has a long way to go before reconciliation can be said to have happened but at least for our little group, reconciliation is happening. It will be my pleasure to hear the apology and to respond.”

Legal Counsel Steven Cooper notes that this is an important step in an ongoing process of reconciliation and recognition of historic misdeeds. Whether the relocations were for purposes of sovereignty, administrative convenience or to promote commercial enterprises, no one ever seemed to take account of the interests of the people being uprooted.

“I can attest to the importance of these settlements and apologies from my decades of personal experience with the people affected. The money is nice but the recognition and the apology are really what matter. The money comes and goes quickly leaving the apology as the real legacy. I only wish that the original group of elders that I met in 2007 were here to see the Minister and hear the apology. Elders such as Mary Anowtalik, the sole survivor of that initial group, were left alone as young adults to deal with circumstances created by an uncaring government intent on pursuing unclear and ulterior purposes under the guise of helping a group in need. There was in fact neither a need to address nor any help provided. So many years and people have passed since what one now lost elder called “the saddest day of my life”, but at least some of the survivors will be here to witness this important event.”

Questions may be directed to Steven Cooper as noted below and David Serkoak as follows:
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