

ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS



NATIONAL CHIEF PERRY BELLEGARDE BULLETIN

March 13, 2020

COVID-19 AND FIRST NATIONS

*The Assembly of First Nations issues regular updates on work underway at the national office.
More information is available at www.afn.ca.*

SUMMARY:

- National Chief had a conference call with Prime Minister Trudeau and federal Ministers on the COVID-19 pandemic and planning and preparedness that addresses the unique situation and needs of First Nations.
- National Chief emphasized the critical need for First Nations leadership to have access to reliable, immediate and accurate information regarding the pandemic and resources to ensure maximum safety and protection for their citizens.
- National Chief secured a commitment that the current \$100 million announced for supports can be expanded to provide for the actual needs of First Nations to respond to this pandemic going forward.

I participated in a conference call today at 4 pm ET with Prime Minister Trudeau, Minister of Indigenous Services Marc Miller, Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam and representatives of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and the Metis National Council. I want to provide you information from this call as it relates to First Nations.

The call was to discuss planning and preparedness for the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. This is an urgent matter for First Nations and the AFN. COVID-19 is a new form of a respiratory tract infection that the World Health Organization (WHO) has deemed to be a pandemic. A pandemic is defined by WHO as a global outbreak of a disease.

The AFN has been pressing for action that is informed by the unique situation of First Nations. The Prime Minister announced \$1 billion on March 12. Of this amount, \$100 million has been allocated as resources for First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

In terms of immediate action, I was clear on our needs and expectations. First and foremost, First Nations require a specific strategy and focus that reflects our unique needs and circumstances. There are 96 remote fly-in First Nation communities across Canada. We need a distinctions-based approach and the Prime Minister agreed. Minister Miller acknowledged the vulnerability of remote, fly-in communities and said the government is working towards a seamless approach.

The federal government has already announced \$100 million in funding that includes First Nations, Inuit and Métis. We know that this amount may not be adequate based on our needs and circumstances. The Prime Minister stated that amount is scalable and can be expanded as required. Federal officials said First Nations should continue to use normal regional channels to access resources from departments like First Nations and Inuit Health Branch and if there are any issues the federal Minister's office can be contacted directly.

Communication with First Nations leadership is critical during this urgent and rapidly changing situation. I stated that First Nations need full access to immediate and ongoing information. We want First Nations leadership and their officials to have access to regional health officials, and those officials must communicate on a regular basis with First Nations in their regions to share information and engage in the development of emergency planning strategies.

Accessibility is an issue for a number of First Nations. We pushed the Prime Minister and Ministers to work with provincial authorities to assess the possibility of extending winter road use in order to ensure adequate goods and services be maintained in northern First Nations. I want the federal government to ensure that Northern Stores have all necessary supplies. This includes food, water and equipment to maintain infrastructure. During this pandemic period, First Nations need full access to test kits, ventilators, masks, hand sanitizers and other necessary resources.

Prevention is our goal but in the event of an outbreak, I told the Prime Minister and Ministers that First Nations must have surge capacity for doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals as needed. We need to be ready for worst case scenarios. Evacuation plans must be in place and First Nations leaders need to be involved. We need to ensure full government resources are ready to mobilize, including planes, vehicles and other resources from Department of National Defence and government departments.

I know this is a time of concern. I want to assure you that myself, the AFN Executive and all AFN staff are working to ensure the needs of First Nations are addressed and that every effort will be made to keep our people safe. I will continue to keep you informed throughout this time and will continue to advocate for the safety and security of First Nations.