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Opinion Column Submission
Black Press

Subject: Senate Report on Children's Rights

By Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond
Representative for Children and Youth

On April 26, 2007, the Senate Committee on Human Rights released a report examining Canada's compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which our country ratified 15 years ago.

The report states that in Canada "... children's rights are being pushed to the side and even violated in a variety of situations – one only needs to take a brief survey of the issue of child poverty, or the situation of Aboriginal or special needs children to realize that this is true. "

Over the years, Canada has played a significant role in promoting children's rights internationally. But to our collective shame, the report illustrates how Canadian children's rights fall victim to politics, power struggles, and always-changing priorities. Our children are paying the price.

The Convention contains general principles (non-discrimination, that best interests of children be a primary consideration, the right of the child to be heard), and addresses specific rights (protection from physical or mental harm the highest attainable standard of health, education, play, etc.)

As a Canadian and a parent, I join the call for action now by all levels of government. I do so also as B.C.'s new Representative for Children and Youth, and my office will work towards ensuring that B.C. meets Canada's obligations to these rights.

Canada must act now to develop a widespread education strategy about children's rights, and motivate the broad community response necessary to ensure these rights. There must be recognition of a human rights issue largely being ignored in our own country.

As well, the federal government must address factors contributing to this crisis -- inadequate funding, limited commitment, jurisdictional nightmares, and intense pressures facing First Nations families.

In releasing the report, Senator Romeo Dallaire said that Canada's treatment of Aboriginal children is "*a national total disgrace*".

Ensuring better outcomes for Aboriginal youth is a particular priority of my new office, and I support the call for an array of economic and social assistance on and off reserves to provide the dignity and care the children's treaty promised.

My office is beginning by developing a plan to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children. We will also be promoting a cross-government approach to use the Convention for fulfilling children's rights in this province.

The way we protect and support all of Canada's children must change. We must begin by respecting sense of place, sense of culture, and children's basic human rights. We can't afford to go on doing otherwise.

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond is B.C.'s new Representative for Children and Youth. A former provincial court judge, she has been active in supporting healthy families and seeking greater respect and recognition of the unique situation for children in society.