

All but one group exits B.C. Missing Women Inquiry in funding feud

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By Suzanne Fournier

VANCOUVER — Twenty of 21 groups have backed out of the inquiry investigating the disappearance and murders of B.C. women and are calling on the United Nations to intervene.

With no sign that the B.C. government will respond to a "last-ditch, Hail Mary appeal" for \$1.5 million to fund lawyers for the victims' side, the Missing Women's Inquiry is slated to open next Tuesday with 14 top police lawyers inside and public interest groups protesting outside.

Lawyer Cameron Ward will be the sole legal counsel inside the inquiry for victims, acting for 17 families whose sisters, wives or mothers were murdered by or linked to jailed-for-life serial killer Robert Pickton.

All organizations withdrawing emphasized they honour the families' right to be present with a lawyer, but say they cannot attend themselves unrepresented.

Amnesty International Canada secretary general Alex Neve noted that despite repeated demands for an inquiry, his group cannot endorse an inquiry that he believes is unfair to public interest groups.

Amnesty has never pulled out of an inquiry before but does not want its participation to be seen as being in approval of the inquiry, said Neve.

"We could not allow our presence to be seen as supporting a process that has gone so far off-track," said Neve. "It's not a level playing field, we're not even on the same field."

Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs president Grand Chief Stewart Phillip said he is "bitterly, bitterly disappointed in this government and (Premier) Christy Clark's failure to intervene to save this inquiry's credibility.

"After 20 years of candlelight vigils, demands for an inquiry into why hundreds of aboriginal women were going missing, after crying endless tears, First Nations and women's groups get nothing," said Phillip.

"We made a last-ditch, Hail Mary appeal, we had a meeting with government and the ministers indicated they will not provide legal counsel for aboriginal and women's groups, and without that we cannot proceed."

B.C. Civil Liberties Association lawyer Micheal Vonn said the inquiry will generate "a million pages to be analyzed — it is not difficult to continue without paid legal counsel, it is impossible."

The Downtown Eastside Women's Centre and the Feb. 14 Women's Memorial March Committee have appealed for support to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which is conducting its own inquiry into "missing and murdered women in Canada"....