



## **NEWS RELEASE**

October 16, 2015

### **Bridge River Indian Band Tragedy**

(Xwisten/Bridge River, B.C. – October 16, 2015) On Wednesday October 14, the Bridge River Indian band (Xwisten) experienced a tragic event, in which a young man from our community attacked a number of our office staff, leaving two persons in serious condition; two persons in critical condition, the assailant dead, and the community traumatized and searching for answers.

Chief Susan James states, “Our band office staff had been working with this young man to develop a realistic plan for stable housing, and a way for him to pay his rent. He had complex social and health needs that our staff did not have the resources or training to adequately respond to. And when the situation became overwhelming for him, he lashed out.”

Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, President of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs stated, “Our deepest heartfelt sympathies to Chief James, the families and all with deep ties to Xwisten affected by this horrifically brutal assault. It should not have happened but truthfully it is not surprising that it did. Under the guise of transparency and belief of rampant misuse of federal funding, band offices across this country have been compelled to administer the Harper Government’s increasingly strict controls on social assistance and employment programmes on-reserve while funding for band operations and programme resources were being severely cut. Without question, racist government policies contribute to the deliberate economic marginalization and poverty of First Nations and are directly responsible for the alarming rates in youth suicides, missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, homelessness and such brutal acts of internalized violence that took place in Xwisten.”

Chief James emphasizes, “Our Social Development staff are essentially financial clerks charged with implementing the federal Social Assistance program. They are not trained social workers or counsellors, but they are forced into providing these types of social supports in our communities. Staff that work in band offices are not there for the money. In general, these are low-paying jobs, they are hard jobs, and now they are dangerous jobs.”

“My thoughts and prayers go out to Xwisten at this time,” stated Regional Chief Shane Gottfriedson. “As most people understand, intergenerational trauma from residential schools is a significant and contributing factor to this tragedy. I offer the community our strength and prayers on behalf of the BC Assembly of First Nations. We as First Nations continue to face unbearable social conditions which directly impact community safety, we are the poorest of the poor and the most disadvantaged. I urge the provincial and federal governments to heed the recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, particularly the 94 calls to action. Governments must implement strong and robust social infrastructure including education, housing, health, child welfare, and justice support systems.”



Bridge River is not alone in not having adequate supports to help our families. What happened in our community on Wednesday could have happened in almost any band office across Canada, because access to trained and skilled social workers who can support complex hard-to-reach families has been carved out and dismantled by decades of government cuts to social spending. The next government of Canada needs to come to terms with the intergenerational trauma that is pervasive in our communities and work with us towards real and meaningful solutions.

“First and foremost, our thoughts and prayers are with all the people impacted in the Bridge River community,” said Grand Chief Edward John of the First Nations Summit Political Executive. “This tragic and unfortunate incident is a wake-up call that has exposed the fragile state of the social safety net many First Nations’ people live under. The very limited payments provided in delegation of services agreements by governments to First Nations creates a very difficult situation for First Nations administrations and results in First Nations effectively being in a position to manage poverty. Federal and provincial government officials must meet with the elected officials at Bridge River to discuss constructive steps to address this critical matter. It goes without saying that unfortunately many other First Nations across Canada face exactly the same circumstances.”

Xwisten requests media to fully respect the privacy of the families and provide time and space for community healing to take place.

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