



PRESS RELEASE

Yellowknives Dene and Canada Agree to Develop Negotiation Pathway for Giant Mine Apology and Compensation

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YELLOWKNIFE – On Friday, January 29th, Yellowknives Dene First Nation Chiefs Edward Sangris and Ernest Betsina met virtually with Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister Carolyn Bennett, Northern Affairs Minister Daniel Vandal, and Northwest Territories MP Michael McLeod.

The meeting was an important step forward in addressing the toxic legacy of the Giant Mine on the Yellowknives Dene First Nation and follows a December 2nd demonstration by members of the Yellowknives Dene at the Giant Mine site. It also follows meetings earlier in January with House of Commons Indigenous and Northern Affairs Committee Chair MP Bob Bratina, and Liberal Indigenous Caucus, chaired by MP Jaime Battiste, all of whom gave their support.

At the meeting, the Chiefs recounted the history of the Giant Mine and Canada's broken promises and recommended a path forward to work together in the spirit of Reconciliation.

The Chiefs made it clear that their people are asking for two things: to heal from the past with a formal apology with just, fair, and equitable compensation, and to set a good path for the future through socio-economic benefits and remediation contracts. To do this, they called on the Government of Canada to:

- open a negotiating table for an apology and compensation;
- ensure socio-economic benefits including a set-aside contract arrangement for the Giant Mine Remediation Project, similar in principle to what the Mi'kmaq received for the Sydney Tar Ponds; and,
- make good on this opportunity for the Yellowknives Dene to return to the land and provide special oversight of the Giant Mine remediation, both during and after the project.

The Ministers agreed that a collaborative discussion process would be required for an apology and compensation, noting in particular the importance of cooperating with the Yellowknives Dene to do so. A follow up meeting to confirm the path forward will take place in February. The Ministers agreed that this needs to be done, and said that all Canadians should hear the history of the Giant Mine's impact on the Yellowknives Dene.

In January, the Yellowknives Dene received the support of the whole Dene Nation for their appeal to the Government of Canada on the Giant Mine. This follows a letter of support late last year from the Akaitcho First Nations that acknowledges the Yellowknives Dene as the people who were most impacted by the Giant Mine.

Quotes

“To have both of the Ministers, our Member of Parliament, and many senior members of their team at the meeting with us shows that we have a shared interest with Canada in resolving the issue of Giant Mine in the spirit of Reconciliation, and to heal the land and clean up the environment for future generations. Our elders and our people want to get back to the land. I thank the Ministers for taking this important step forward for our people. At this meeting, they have at last agreed to move forward on a negotiating table with us to discuss an apology and compensation, and now we need to ensure that this work gets done very urgently for our people. They must now put their good words into action.”

- Chief Edward Sangris, Dettah Chief of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation

“I thank the Ministers and their team for meeting with us. This was an important step forward to ensure that the people who were impacted the most by the toxic legacy of Giant Mine, the Yellowknives Dene, are the ones who will benefit from the remediation project. We want to work together with the Government of Canada on the Giant Mine project which is in our traditional territory in order to ensure a new legacy for our people which includes economic independence, education, skills training, jobs, healing of our people and the healing of the land. This project is moving forward right now, and we believe the Ministers now understand that there is no time to lose.”

- Chief Ernest Betsina, Ndilo Chief of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation

“Righting historical wrongs and working collaboratively to renew our relationship with First Nations is key to advancing reconciliation in Canada. We have been working with the Yellowknives Dene First Nation to conduct comprehensive research necessary to better understand the legacy of Giant Mine and its impacts on their communities. We are committed to continue moving forward in collaboration with the Yellowknives Dene First Nation.”

- The Honourable Carolyn Bennett, P.C., M.P., Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations

“The management of a contaminated site goes beyond removing harmful substances; it also involves citizens who have concerns about the health and safety of their families and communities. I recognize and thank the Yellowknives Dene First Nation for their tremendous work on this important matter. I look forward to continuing to work together, in partnership, to address the legacy of Giant Mine.”

- The Honourable Daniel Vandal, P.C., M.P., Minister of Northern Affairs

“Following our productive meeting on Friday, I am looking forward to continued collaboration between the Government of Canada and the Yellowknives Dene First Nation as we work to resolve the harmful legacy of Giant Mine together in the spirit of reconciliation.”

Michael McLeod, Member of Parliament for Northwest Territories

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Background Put Forward by the Yellowknives Dene

The Yellowknives Dene First Nation is made up of the two communities of Ndilo and Dettah. They have occupied and used an extensive area around Tı Ndeè, or Great Slave Lake, in what is now Canada's Northwest Territories, since time immemorial.

The west side of Yellowknife Bay, where the Giant Mine site and the City of Yellowknife are today, was particularly important to the Yellowknives Dene for harvesting, cultural and spiritual practices. The Yellowknives Dene protected this area by establishing their villages on the east side of the bay and preserving "the store," as Elders still call it today, for hunting and gathering purposes.

It was on this traditional territory that Giant Mine, one of the richest and longest-running gold mine in Canadian history, was built. This was done with Canada's knowledge, permission, and support, and without any compensation or consultation for the Yellowknives Dene.

Timeline Put Forward by the Yellowknives Dene

1900 – Yellowknives Dene signed Treaty 8, understanding it to be a peace and friendship agreement that did not surrender ownership or control over their traditional territory, nor curtail their ability to harvest animals throughout it.

1918 – Canada put in place new game laws in the Northwest Territories, allowing hunting and trapping licenses for non-Indigenous peoples. This led to starvation among the Yellowknives Dene.

1920 – The imposition of the new game laws led to a boycott of the Treaty, in which the Yellowknives Dene Chief Joseph "Susie" Drygeese led others from around Great Slave Lake to refuse Treaty payments in protest against what they viewed as infringements on their rights and way of life. Oral history holds that Crown representatives capitulated to the boycott and agreed to protect Indigenous harvesting rights within a territory drawn by Chief Drygeese on a map given to all the parties.

1923 – Canada created the Yellowknife Preserve, a 70,000-square-mile tract of land between the north shore of Great Slave Lake and Great Bear Lake, to be protected for the sole use of hunting and trapping by Indigenous people. In Canada's words, this was done because otherwise there would be a "grave danger of those natives being reduced to want and starvation."

1930s – Without the involvement of the Yellowknives Dene, senior officials in Ottawa advanced the opinion that the Yellowknife Preserve was incompatible with mining, which they saw as critical to Northern development.

1940s – Again without the consultation with the Yellowknives Dene, Canada granted non-Indigenous people special permission to hunt within a 210-square-mile area of the Yellowknife Preserve. By the end of the decade, Canada had removed these areas, which included the site of the newly operational Giant Mine, from the Yellowknife Preserve entirely.

1940s – Without consultation with the Yellowknives Dene, Canada encouraged gold roasting at Giant Mine, a process that government documents show Canada knew released arsenic directly into the surrounding air and water. A scrubber was installed at the nearby Con Mine to reduce arsenic emissions, but no scrubber was installed at Giant Mine. In 1949-51, airborne arsenic emissions from Giant estimated at 7,500kg/day.

1950s – Without consultation with the Yellowknives Dene, Canada transferred responsibility for the Yellowknife Preserve to the Northwest Territories Council, a body of federal bureaucrats and appointees overseeing the Territory's affairs from Ottawa.

1955 - The Council summarily abolished the Yellowknife Preserve without any available record of consultation or discussion with the Yellowknives Dene.

1950s – Arsenic poisoning kills one child, sickens multiple Yellowknives Dene members, and causes the mass death of nearly an entire herd of cattle. Records show that emissions from Giant led to dangerous levels of arsenic in the snowmelt Yellowknives Dene on Latham Island used for drinking water every spring from 1949 to 1952, and again in 1954, and that Canada's primary response was to run warnings in local newspapers even though most Yellowknives Dene at the time could not read.

2004 – By the time of the mine's closing, it had produced seven million ounces of gold. There was no financial benefit to the Yellowknives Dene.

Today – 237,000 tons of arsenic trioxide are still stored inside the mine, and hundreds of thousands of tons on the surface are still not completely accounted for. This is enough to kill every person on Earth many times over, and our community is faced with storing this in perpetuity. Currently, there is no method to render the arsenic inert, despite its current remediation project. The arsenic will be there forever, yet the project is budgeted for only 40 years.

The monster that is the Giant Mine came between us and our way of life on the land. It still haunts our communities in the social effects that spiraled out from this poisoning of our lands. Food insecurity. Displacement. Intergenerational poverty. Loss of meaning. Homelessness. Misery. Despair. Alcoholism. Suicide. This is Giant Mine's toxic legacy.