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زبانهای اروپایی

By Amy Goodman/ USA, Racism and Capitalist Oppression

03.08.2022

Interview with Nick Estes

The internees for indigenous minors were part of a 'horrendous genocidal process' perpetrated in the US.



Sources: Democracy Now! - Photo: Indigenous children who were forced to attend the boarding school called Carlisle Indian Industrial School.

The U.S. Department of the Interior has documented the deaths of more than five hundred Indigenous children in federally run or subsidized boarding schools that operated from 1819 to 1969. The actual number of deaths is believed to be much higher.

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The investigation, which identified 53 sites in former boarding schools where people were buried, was ordered by Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, the first indigenous cabinet chief whose grandparents were forced to attend a boarding school at the age of eight. "It's inappropriate to say they were educational institutions or schools when, in reality, not many people were finishing their studies and, worse, many weren't even surviving the terrible living conditions in those boarding schools," says Nick Estes, historian and co-founder of The Red Nation. Estes says the institutions were part of a "genocidal process" of "dispossession and theft of lands and resources from indigenous peoples."

AMY GOODMAN: A new [study](#) by the U.S. Department of the Interior has documented the deaths of 500 minors in indigenous boarding schools that the U.S. federal government administered or subsidized, though the number of deaths is believed to be much higher. The report identified 53 cemeteries linked to these boarding schools, which were in operation for more than a century. This is the first time the Department of the Interior has documented some of the horrific history of boarding schools, known for their brutal assimilation practices that forced students to change their dress, language and culture.

The investigation was ordered by Deb Haaland, Secretary of the Interior and a member of the Pueblo de Laguna indigenous community. His grandparents were forced to attend boarding school at the age of 8. Mr. Haaland introduced the report.

DEB HAALAND: For more than a century, tens of thousands of indigenous children were removed from their communities and forced to attend boarding schools that the U.S. government administered, specifically the Department of the Interior, along with religious institutions.

[...] My maternal grandparents were only 8 years old when they were separated from their parents' culture and communities and forced to live in boarding schools until they were 13. Many children in their situation never returned home.

Federal policies that attempted to end native identity, language, and culture still manifest themselves in the pain faced today by tribal communities, which suffer cycles of violence and abuse, disappearance of indigenous people, premature deaths, poverty and loss of wealth, mental health disorders, and substance abuse. Acknowledging the impacts of the

federal internees system for indigenous minors cannot be just a historic reckoning. We must also chart a path to address this very problematic legacy. The fact that I can be here today as the first indigenous secretary of a Government is a testament to the strength and determination of the native peoples. I am here thanks to the perseverance of my ancestors. Thanks to people like my grandmother and my mother. And the work we will do with the Federal Indigenous Boarding School Initiative will have a transformative impact on generations to come.

AMY GOODMAN: That was Home Secretary Deb Haaland. Matthew War Bonnet, who at the age of six was taken to boarding school on the Sioux People's Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, testified May 12 about that experience before the House Subcommittee on Indigenous Peoples.

MATTHEW WAR BONNET: My experience at boarding school was very painful and traumatic. I remember when I first arrived at school. The priests took us to a large room that had six or eight bathtubs. A priest put all of us little children in a bathtub, rubbed us hard with a large brush and left our skin and back in the flesh. Also, they cut our hair. Then they put all the little kids in the same bedroom. We were all together, from first to fourth grade. At night you could hear all the children crying.

AMY GOODMAN: To talk more about the history of U.S. Government-run or funded Indigenous boarding schools, we're joined from Minneapolis by Nick Estes. Estes is a writer, historian, and author of the book "Our History is the Future: The Sioux Struggle Against the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance." He is also co-founder of the indigenous resistance group The Red Nation and a citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Reservation.

Nick, welcome back to Democracy Now! Talk about the importance of this new report from the Department of the Interior.

NICK ESTES: Thank you so much for having me, Amy.

As you could hear in the voices of people like Secretary Haaland, this is a very emotional experience for a large part of the indigenous peoples of this country. And it should be an

emotional experience for the non-indigenous people of this country. This is a historic moment. While not new to indigenous peoples, they may be new to those who hear testimonies of this horrific genocidal process.

I think there is a reason why the forcible transfer of children from one group to another is one of the definitions of genocide under international law. That's what we're talking about, because taking away children, the process of removing indigenous minors from their groups, has been a strategy to terrorize native families for centuries. We saw this in the mass removal of native children from their communities to take them to boarding schools, as this new report shows, or to give them up for adoption and leave them under the guardianship of mostly white families, which occurred mainly in the twentieth century.

This is a historic report in that respect, because it documents, I think for the first time, that the federal government admits its role in this genocidal process. Of course, they do not use that language in the report, but many of the researchers, most of whom are indigenous, who did the preliminary work in this first volume, which I understand will be the first of several volumes, agree that what happened constituted a generalized and systematic destruction not only of our culture, but of our nations, as well as an evident usurpation of our lands.

And I think it's important to talk about that. Settler colonialism does not mean just an attack on native people out of hatred for our culture, our language or our beliefs. This boarding school system was created at a time when the U.S. government, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was seeking to consolidate its western border through the Dawes General Adjudication Act, which caused tens of millions of hectares of indigenous territory to be made available for settlement by white settlers while native minors were used as hostages. In this way the reformists of the time expressed themselves. That's the language they were using. They said, "We're going to take these kids hostage" to ensure, in quotes, "the good behavior" of their people.

AMY GOODMAN: You have visited and reported on one particular Indian boarding school, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which was established in 1879. Can you talk about that as an example of what happened across this country?

NICK ESTES: Carlisle really became the archetype of boarding schools for Indians off the reservations. And in fact, at the Carlisle Indian School, the first groups that came in came from the Lakota people, my nation, specifically from the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations, because we had maintained a historic resistance against the Dawes Act, and that was practically a way to break the tribal ties of our people.

That first class that made up the boarding school is described in the two autobiographies that Luther Standing Bear wrote. He belonged to the Sioux tribe of the Rosebud Reservation. In his writings he spoke of the fact that, more than schools, these places were prisoner of war camps, where they did not learn the alphabet or languages or mathematics, the things one would expect to learn in a school. Instead, they learned military discipline, because [their founder] was a military man: Colonel Pratt. There was a bizarre agreement between the U.S. Army and the Department of the Interior to run this out-of-reserve boarding school, whose military discipline was instilled in many of the boarding schools outside the reserves, as well as instilling American patriotism, flag worship, and religious obedience.

Of the first classes that formed the Carlisle Indian School, according to the testimony of Luther Standing Bear, who was part of the first class, half of those children never returned home. Many of them died in that school. That is why I find it a bit inappropriate to call them educational institutions or even schools since there were not many people who graduated, not to mention those who did not survive the precarious conditions.

This new report also documents forced labour. The unpaid work of indigenous children was essentially used to subsidize the lack of resources that the federal government was not allocating to the education of indigenous communities. So it was a horrible experience for those who never got out of there, but it was also a horrible experience for those who did manage to get out.

To this day, at the entrance of the Carlisle Indigenous School, there is a cemetery with hundreds of tombstones. Many tribal nations, including the Sioux tribe of the Rosebud Reservation, have been fighting to have their ancestors returned. Some have succeeded. But it is also important to note that some of the children who died there belonged to tribal nations that have protocols about not disturbing their ancestors when they are buried

underground. So it's a very delicate situation. It's not just a problem for the federal government, but also for the U.S. military.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to ask you...

NICK ESTES: Because that place is a functioning military base. I think it's also important to point that out.

AMY GOODMAN: Nick Estes, an investigation by Preston McBride of Dartmouth University, has suggested that up to 40,000 Native American children died in government-run boarding schools across the U.S. But this report talks about 500. Can you elaborate on this discrepancy?

NICK ESTES: Yes. At the Interior Department press conference, both Secretary Deb Haaland and Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Bryan Newland noted that this was a preliminary report and that they have identified more than 53 marked or unmarked graves in several of these boarding schools outside the reservations, as well as in boarding schools within reservations. I think it's a really sensitive issue because, in relation to, for example, the Rapid City Indigenous School, which is in the city of Rapid City, South Dakota, the cemeteries are, in fact, within the community itself. There have been housing projects that had been built over those cemeteries. And many people are reluctant to identify those places publicly because of the history of grave looting in many of these cemeteries. So I think what Preston is saying is very true, this is an undercount as it is an initial assessment of these specific cemeteries. But I think as this investigation progresses and more documents are made public we're going to see those numbers continue to rise. And it's a very tragic thing.

I consider it important to note that this initiative began in June 2021, when several hundred graves of native minors were found in Canada. But where are the headlines now about all the inspections that many First Nations are conducting in these places? The numbers are in the thousands right now, but it still doesn't make the news. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to this as it develops and really listen to many of the native leaders as well as the native researchers who have historically been working on this. This is not something new to us. We don't have a definitive figure. All we have is the common

experience of the boarding school system, as it has affected each and every indigenous person in this country.

AMY GOODMAN: Do you have any misgivings about the report? It is true that the Interior Department report says they hope to document thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of deaths. But we're talking about a report that was released by the Department of the Interior and that the Agency's Bureau of Indian Affairs worked on, which actually managed the entire boarding school system. The difference now, of course, is that Deb Haaland, the first Indigenous woman in history to be part of a U.S. government, is in charge.

NICK ESTES: I think it's important to note that Deb Haaland has been at the helm of the Department of the Interior for just over a year. And a year, compared to a century and a half of genocidal policies against indigenous peoples, is not much, if we analyze how history develops.

Similarly, it is important to note that the agency responsible for these crimes against humanity is now going to deliver justice, so to speak. On Thursday, tribes asked about how Haaland's office will address the issue of repairs. The Department of the Interior is designing its truth and reconciliation process based on the Canadian model. But it should be noted that Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission only emerged as a result of a class action lawsuit on behalf of survivors of internees. And I would say that the Department of the Interior has a very poor record of taking responsibility for its own crimes.

One example is the settlement in *Cobell v. Salazar* that occurred in 2011. The main plaintiff was banker Elouise Cobell, who belonged to the Blackfoot Nation. Cobell conducted a forensic audit of the United States and found that the federal government had irregularly handled \$176 billion of individual Indian money and the Interior Department self-adjudicated, because we are still considered state wards, \$3.5 billion. That's only a few cents compared to what she had accounted for in terms of the compensation we had been awarded.

So, it is no coincidence that the indigenous population is protected by the same department that manages wildlife and federal lands. At the beginning of the broadcast we heard that the Department of the Interior is backtracking on its federal land bidding plan. It's not just about boarding schools for indigenous minors, because these boarding schools were just one part of a larger process of dispossession and theft of indigenous peoples' lands and resources, because the boarding school system for indigenous minors was using money from treaties on annuities and federal funds that were intended for indigenous education to finance this genocidal process. That money was obtained through the sale of our land to white settlers. It was also obtained through the dispossession of those lands by the federal government itself. So there are many parties here that must be held accountable.

The same report identifies 39,000 boxes of printed material owned by the federal government. I think it's over nine million pages of documents that need to be reviewed. So, allocating just seven million dollars for this research process covering a century and a half of genocidal politics is like a grain of sand as to what needs to happen. It is important to note that Rep. Sharice Davids, a Kansas Democrat and also a member of an Indian nation, introduced a bill that Congress is reviewing and will likely allocate more federal funds toward an investigative process that not only examines the federal boarding school system for indigenous minors, but also the role of religious groups and, specifically, the role of the Catholic Church in these genocidal educational policies.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, of course we will continue to keep an eye on this case.

Translated by Ivan Hincapié. Edited by Igor Moreno.

Source to video and

text: https://www.democracynow.org/es/2022/5/13/interior_department_indian_boarding_schools_500

Rebellion 02.08.2022