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SCO DENOUNCES PALLISTER'S DANGEROUS COMMENTS REGARDING INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: January 21, 2021

ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) is appalled at the Premier's comments today that placed blame on Indigenous leaders for the high case numbers of COVID-19 among Manitoba's First Nations.

"We have seen this type of rhetoric from Pallister numerous times throughout the pandemic and it is absolutely unacceptable and quite dangerous," said SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. "His comments only serve to further stigmatize First Nation people and undermine our leadership at a time when First Nation Chiefs, Councils, and health care workers are doing everything they can to save lives and keep people safe."

At today's daily COVID-19 press conference, Mr. Pallister stated that in December, an Indigenous leader proclaimed that public health orders did not need to be followed in his case. Pallister then linked the rise in case numbers seen on First Nations in Manitoba to these alleged comments from the Indigenous leader in December.

"There are many reasons why First Nations are more vulnerable during a pandemic, all stemming back to centuries of colonization and stolen land," said Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. "Decades of dealing with an infrastructure deficit, lack of housing and overcrowding, economic apartheid leading to high rates of poverty, systemic racism leading directly to poor health outcomes, and many other factors have all led to the current situation we have today where First Nation people account for a significant number of active cases in Manitoba. Pallister is again purposefully sowing seeds of division to distract from his own mishandling of the pandemic, and the failure of his administration to prevent the dramatic rise in cases that we saw throughout Manitoba at the end of last year."

As of today, January 21, First Nation people account for 64 per cent of Manitoba's new cases, 74 per cent of active cases, 49 per cent of hospitalizations, and 65 per cent of Intensive Care Unit (ICU) patients.

First Nation leaders have been responsible for some of the toughest restrictions imposed in Manitoba. Despite the misleading statements from Mr. Pallister, it is First Nation leaders

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urging the province to enforce tougher restrictions, including limiting travel in order to prevent the spread of the virus.

“First Nation leaders across Manitoba have shown phenomenal leadership during this pandemic,” said Grand Chief Daniels. “Our Chiefs were successful at largely keeping COVID-19 away from our communities for many months in 2020, they responded quickly when case numbers began to rise in the fall of 2020, and vaccine rollout in First Nations has so far been more efficient and has gone more smoothly than the province’s rollout off reserve.”

Mr. Pallister also took the opportunity to criticize the federal government today for not “coming out to say that provincial public health order have to be respected on and off reserve.”

“As a Treaty partner, I would expect a much better understanding of First Nations’ rights and jurisdiction from the Premier,” concluded Grand Chief Daniels. “First Nation people do not need the federal government to tell them the importance of following public health orders during a pandemic. First Nations leaders, health care workers, and many of our community members have been working tirelessly throughout the pandemic and should be praised for everything they have done to keep people safe.”

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The Southern Chiefs’ Organization represents 34 First Nations and more than 80,000 citizens in what is now called southern Manitoba. SCO is an independent political organization that protects, preserves, promotes, and enhances First Nations peoples’ inherent rights, languages, customs, and traditions through the application and implementation of the spirit and intent of the Treaty-making process.

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