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SCO DEMANDS JUSTICE AND A FULLY PUBLIC AND TRANSPARENT INQUIRY INTO THE SUSPICIOUS DEATH OF WILLIAM AHMO

We Continue to See Our People Become Victims of Public Institutions – Grand Chief Daniels

May 6, 2021

ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) is calling for an immediate and fully transparent public inquiry into the death of William Ahmo, a citizen of Sagkeeng Anicinabe First Nation. William Walter Ahmo, 45, was in custody of the Headingley Correctional Institute (HCI) at the time of his passing. New information released this week from the Ahmo family's lawyer points to egregious human rights violations and a brutal beating at the hands of HCI correctional officers.

"William's tragic and needless death happened nearly three months ago, yet neither Manitoba corrections nor the RCMP have released any credible information to the public," stated SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. "Our people are being killed at the hands of colonial and racist institutions and there is no accountability, no transparency, and certainly no justice."

It was back in February that RCMP officers were called by officials from HCI about an incident between correctional officers and William, which left him seriously injured and unresponsive. They took him to the Health Sciences Centre (HSC) where he was treated while remaining under guard in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). William died one week later.

Earlier this week, new information came to light publicly for the first time in the case when the Ahmo family's lawyer detailed allegations of William's brutal beating by HCI correctional officers, allegedly starting with racist jokes that angered him.

Reportedly, the offensive and demeaning jokes led to an argument between the correctional officers and William, escalating into an hours-long standoff between him and the HCI officers. A serious incident response team then came into the unit in full tactical gear, throwing stun grenades and using gas canisters on William despite the fact there was no riot. They then allegedly beat him until he was unresponsive.

"We know there is video surveillance of the event, we know there is an autopsy report, yet nothing, not one shred of real evidence has been shared with us or the leadership of Sagkeeng Anicinabe First Nation," continued Grand Chief Daniels. "Several weeks ago, we saw a police officer finally held to account in the racially motivated killing of George Floyd in the US, a conviction which relied on video evidence. Unfortunately in this case, while we know there is video evidence, it's in the hands of a colonial government, which has so far chosen to avoid scrutiny by withholding key information."

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A public inquiry can be conducted to determine the cause, manner, and circumstances of the death along with deciding if the death warrants further investigation. If it is determined that the fatality warrants an investigation, that process should commence immediately. Already in 2021, six people have died in custody, including another citizen of Sagkeeng Anicinabe First Nation, Dwayne Simard, who died at Stony Mountain Institution on March 1, 2021.

“Our people are grieving these two deaths. They weren’t just inmates, they were fathers, brothers, sons, and our dear friends” said Chief Derrick Henderson of Sagkeeng Anicinabe First Nation. “Our people are not getting the answers they deserve. They are being treated as less than human and denied their basic human rights. The systemic injustices that we face take a harsh toll on the families and we can’t stop fighting until true justice is served.”

In what is now Manitoba, approximately 75 per cent of all people in custody at provincial and federal institutions are Indigenous, despite making up 18 per cent of the adult population. Worse still, 70 per cent have not had their day in court and have not yet been convicted of the crime for which they have been accused of committing, including William Ahmo.

“This senseless loss of life has got to stop. As we fight for justice every day, we also see the gaps widening for First Nation people. These public institutions must be accountable to all people, first and foremost the First Peoples of this land who have suffered too much and for far too long. We cannot stand for anything less - our lives matter,” concluded Grand Chief Daniels.

SCO will continue to do everything we can to support the Ahmo family during this difficult time. They remain in our thoughts and prayers.

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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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