News

A child's red dress hangs on a stake near the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residen

A child's red dress hangs on a stake near the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in Kamloops, British Columbia. For years, Indigenous people in Canada have wanted an apology from the pope — on Canadian soil — for the church's role in abuse at Catholic-run residential schools. A meeting scheduled for December at the Vatican has been postponed because of COVID-19. (CNS photo/Jennifer Gauthier, Reuters)

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The long-planned encounter between Indigenous Canadians and Pope Francis in Rome is being put off while everybody learns more about the omicron variant of COVID-19, according to a joint release from three Indigenous organizations involved in the trip and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"The risk of infection and the fluid nature of the evolving global situation presents too great a threat at this time," the parties said in a Dec. 7 news release.

The trip was thrown into doubt early that morning when Assembly of First Nations National Chief RoseAnne Archibald told an online meeting of the AFN her delegation

would not attend at this time.

"The health and well-being of our delegates, their families and communities is paramount to us, and we will not put anyone in harm's way if we can help it," she said.

The move appeared to catch the other two Indigenous organizations, the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and the Métis National Council, by surprise.

"I think there was just a little bit of miscommunication, you know," Janna Van De Sande, Métis National Council communications officer, told The Catholic Register. "And that happens with a lot of different players involved in this trip. We're trying our best to make sure that everything is being communicated."

The three Indigenous organizations and the Canadian bishops' conference were immediately plunged into emergency meetings to decide whether any part of the trip could go ahead. Officials came out of that meeting with a statement that emphasized the safety of elderly residential school survivors and their communities in the face of a more virulent strain of COVID-19 now spreading across the globe.

"We take comfort in the desire, conveyed to us by the Holy See, that the safety of the delegation should inform any decision to move forward. It is also important to note that the delegation is postponed, not canceled," said the statement at the end of the meeting.

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The postponement comes just one week before the group was to leave for Rome.

"The decision to postpone was a heartbreaking one, made after careful consultation with delegates, family members, community leaders, public health officials and the leadership of each of the three National Indigenous Organizations," said the joint release.

This is not the first time the meeting has been postponed. Planning for Indigenous delegates to go to Rome was put in cold storage just after COVID-19 prompted global lockdowns early in 2020. When unmarked graves were discovered first in Tk'emlúpsemc Secwepemc territory next to the old Kamloops Indian Residential

school in May, then at several other former residential schools through the summer, planning for the trip was reignited.

The Canadian bishops, who were financing the trip, have emphasized that Pope Francis and the Holy See want to see it rescheduled.

"We understand that the Holy See is very much committed to rescheduling this visit in the new year, and we look forward to the opportunity for Indigenous elders, knowledge keepers, residential school survivors and youth to participate in private meetings with Pope Francis," said the joint release.

[Michael Swan is associate editor of The Catholic Register, Toronto.]