

■ MAYANS VISIT

Stories of two American justice systems

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Free Press

It was a meeting of cultures at UNBC, May 28, when five Mayan delegates from Guatemala met with local aboriginal groups.

The meeting was part of a knowledge exchange program sponsored by the Law Courts Education Society to promote greater awareness of aboriginal justice systems. In February, delegates from B.C. toured Guatemala to learn how the Guatemalan government is incorporating Mayan traditional justice into the legal system.

"Both countries are working on similar processes to incorpo-

rate aboriginal values in the justice system," Canadian delegate Jim Woods said. "It takes time to establish these alternative processes."

Woods is a member of the Law Courts Education Society's aboriginal steering committee.

Canada will be assisting the Mayans to address the massacre of over 200,000 indigenous people during the Guatemalan Civil War, he said.

"Nothing was done to bring people to justice, especially those in government," Wood said. "They're hoping they'll bring the people who committed these crimes to justice."

Mayan elder Alphonso Ortiz Gomez

— with the assistance of a Spanish translator — said the Mayan justice system is a community-focused, consensus-based system.

"To apply Mayan justice (we) have to take into account what is the crime and who is affected," Gomez said. "If the crime is severe, (we) have to turn it over to the Guatemalan authorities."

To begin the Mayan justice process, a person must come forward to the elders and say what has happened.

"(We) give the person up to three days to come before the community," Gomez said. "If it is something serious, they'll call witnesses and have more

people involved. If it is something simple, it can be dealt with by the elders and the families."

The accused, the victim, the elders, family members and other affected people will take part in the justice

circle until the issue is resolved, he said.

"This is not solved until both parties are happy. This is a peaceful discussion," Gomez said.

Community norms and precedent are used to determine res-

titution, he added.

"There are 22 different Mayan language groups," Gomez said. "But studies have shown the justice system is very similar between all of them."

The Guatemalan delegation toured Prince

George Regional Correctional Centre and UNBC, and met with the Prince George Urban Aboriginal Justice Society, Prince George Law Courts Society and Lheidli T'enneh Chief Dominic Frederick and elders.

