

Natives to press for Peltier's release

AIM activist jailed 24 years for murder

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Canada's native leaders want Justice Minister Anne McLellan to review the extradition of American native activist Leonard Peltier, and will press Ottawa to exert pressure on the U.S. government for the convicted killer's release.

Phil Fontaine, Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, met yesterday with Mr. Peltier at Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary, near Kansas City, Kan.

Mr. Peltier, 55, has maintained his innocence in the shooting deaths of FBI agents Ronald Williams, 27, and Jack Coler, 28, during an exchange of gunfire on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota in June, 1975. He is serving back-to-back life sentences at Leavenworth.

Mr. Fontaine said Amnesty International considers Mr. Peltier to be a political prisoner, and there remain many unanswered questions about his extradition from Canada, where he sought refuge, as well as lingering doubts over the fairness of his trial in Fargo, N.D., more than two decades ago.

In the past, luminaries such as actors Robert Redford and Danny Glover, singer Joni Mitchell and South African Bishop Desmond Tutu have called for Mr. Peltier's release. Former Canadian justice minister Warren Allmand also called for Mr. Peltier's release be-



Phil Fontaine, Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, speaks yesterday before a poster of Leonard Peltier. Mr. Fontaine is joining counterparts in the U.S. to lobby on Mr. Peltier's behalf.

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cause of questions surrounding his extradition, Mr. Fontaine said.

Mr. Fontaine was joined yesterday by leaders from the National Congress of American Indians in a four-hour prison meeting with Mr. Peltier.

"He's an important symbol in our community," Mr. Fontaine said in an interview. "He represents the injustice that has been visited on indigenous people of North America and the undying spirit of standing up to that injustice. He maintains his innocence and we believe him."

On Feb. 6, Mr. Peltier, in failing health, will have spent 24 years in prison. "He's had a stroke," Mr. Fontaine said. "So he's lost sight in one eye and he has problems with his jaw so he can't eat properly. But he's very strong. He said: 'I'm innocent. I will be free.'"

Mr. Peltier arrived at the troubled

Pine Ridge reservation through his activist work with the American Indian Movement. He fled to Canada after the shootings but was later extradited to the United States partly on the strength of testimony by Myrtle Poor Bear. She later recanted claims that she had seen Mr. Peltier pull the trigger and was declared mentally unfit to testify at trial. After a five-week trial, Mr. Peltier was convicted on April 18, 1977, of two counts of first-degree murder.

"We'll be asking [Ms. McLellan] to call on the U.S. government to free Mr. Peltier on humanitarian grounds," Mr. Fontaine said. "With the American delegation we'll be pursuing this with President Clinton. We think it's historic. It's the first time the Assembly of First Nations and the National Congress of American Indians have joined together to pursue such a goal."