

Denmark apologizes for contraception forced on Indigenous Greenlanders

BY WILLIAM BOOTH

In a ceremony that sought to redress old wrongs — and showcase new sensitivities by a former colonial power — the prime minister of Denmark and her Greenlandic counterpart on Wednesday formally apologized for their governments' roles in the medical mistreatment of Greenlandic Inuit girls and women who were given invasive contraception without their consent by the Danish health authorities, in cases dating from the 1960s until the early 1990s.

The public apology by Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, from a stage at the main cultural center in the Greenlandic capital, Nuuk, comes at a time when Denmark is pouring attention and funds on Greenland, a semiautonomous territory that remains part of the Danish realm, aiming to repair colonial wounds amid covetous attention from President Donald Trump.

Trump has repeatedly stressed that “one way or the other,” the United States intends to “get” Greenland, calling the world’s largest island crucial for U.S. national security, both for its location as North America’s front door in the Arctic and for its vast mineral wealth, especially the rare earth metals needed to power technologies of the 21st century.

“Dear women, families and Greenlanders. Today there is only one right thing to say to you. Excuse me. On behalf of Denmark, I apologize,” Frederiksen said, visibly moved as she stood before the hushed audience.

The Danish prime minister recalled a story from one of the women, who said the insertion of

the IUD, when she was a teenager, felt like having knives inside her.

“Where were the health authorities, where was the state, where were those who were supposed to take care of you?” Frederiksen asked. “The reality is that the system that was supposed to take care of you harmed you.”

Greenland’s prime minister, Jens-Frederik Nielsen, also apologized for the role of former governments in allowing the forced contraception of Indigenous women and girls. The Greenlandic population — just 57,000 people — is mostly Inuit.

Imagine how the women felt, Nielsen said: “Despair, grief, powerlessness, anger, pain, skepticism, helplessness, discouragement, hopelessness, crying, confusion, depression, purposelessness.”

He called the events “one of the darkest chapters in Greenland’s history.”

In a damning report released this month, the Danish government revealed that its doctors put intrauterine devices into Greenlandic girls as young as 12 without their consent or knowledge.

In remarks to reporters Wednesday, Greenland’s prime minister said he thought it was right for the Danish government to establish a reconciliation fund to compensate the victims.

Greenland was colonized by Denmark in the 18th century and has spent most of its modern history as a Danish possession, producing vast quantities of seafood and seal skins. The territory was given extensive self-rule in 2009. Many Greenlanders say they eventually want full independence — but slowly. In January polling,



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Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen speaks Wednesday in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland.

they also overwhelmingly rejected the idea of Greenland becoming a part of the United States.

Earlier this year Denmark said it will spend \$2 billion more to boost security in the Arctic region, in partnership with Greenland, and the Faroe Islands, another autonomous territory.

From the early 1960s, the government in Copenhagen sought to limit the growth of the Greenlandic population, which was reliant — as it is to this day — on Denmark to pay for infrastructure, health, housing and education.

The government-sponsored re-

port described 410 cases in detail, based on medical records and testimonies by the women. In more than 300 cases, the report states, the patients suffered health complications. Danish officials said last year that half the fertile women in Greenland at the time — as many as 4,500 women and girls — received IUDs in the 1960s and 1970s. The report was written by researchers from the University of Greenland and the National Institute of Public Health at the University of Southern Denmark.

Naja Lyberth is one of one of the 143 women who have sued for

compensation in connection with the IUD insertion. Lyberth told the audience Wednesday that the use of the devices meant that many of the women could not have children.

Aviaja Fontain, whose mother, Hedvig Frederiksen, was fitted with an IUD at the age of 14 without her knowledge, said that the women who campaigned for the apology were glad to see the Danish prime minister come to Nuuk — but also frustrated that it took so long.

“For them it’s a big day. They’re finally getting the acknowledg-

ment that they have been seeking from the Danish government,” Fontain told The Washington Post. “My mother says that this will heal a bit of the scar. But that the scar will always be there.”

All the girls in Hedvig Frederiksen’s class were called into a doctor’s office together, according to the story that Frederiksen, now 65, told her daughter.

“They would go into the room and then come out crying,” Fontain said of her mother’s memories of the procedure. “Many of the women did not tell their stories for years because they felt shame. They acted — they felt — like they had been violated, like rape, and they were ashamed of what happened.”

Naaja H. Nathanielsen, Greenland’s minister for justice and gender equality, told the Guardian that the announcement of a possible compensation fund should have come sooner. “The problem with proposing this in the 11th hour before the apology is that it risks being viewed as calculated instead of sincere and remorseful,” she said.

Denmark is far from the first nation to acknowledge wrongs against Indigenous people.

The Australian government made a formal apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in 2008 for the forced removal from their families of Indigenous children.

The Canadian government has issued multiple apologies to its Indigenous people, including an expression of remorse by its prime minister in 2008 for the Indian Residential School system, which forcibly took children from their families for more than a century.