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**PRESS RELEASE**

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**For Immediate Release**

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**CANONCITO MAN PLEADS GUILTY TO FEDERAL  
CHILD SEX ASSAULT OFFENSE**

ALBUQUERQUE – This morning in federal court, **Vernest Ray Chackee**, 20, an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation who resides in Canonicito, N.M., pled guilty to an aggravated child sexual abuse offense under a plea agreement with the U.S. Attorney’s Office. Under the terms of the plea agreement, Chackee will serve 12 years of imprisonment. Thereafter, Chackee will be on supervised release for at least five years. He also will be required to register as a sex offender. Chackee has been in federal custody since his arrest on June 28, 2011, and remains in custody pending his sentencing hearing which has yet to be scheduled.

U.S. Attorney Kenneth J. Gonzales said that Chackee was indicted on April 13, 2011, and charged with three counts of aggravated sexual assault. The indictment alleged that Chackee sexually assaulted a female child under the age of 12 on three occasions between August 2010 and January 2011. The assaults allegedly occurred in Tohajilee, N.M., which is on the Navajo Indian Reservation.

According to court filings, Chackee’s unlawful conduct consisted of using his finger to digitally penetrate the child’s genitals. This conduct came to light on January 19, 2011, when the child’s mother discovered Chackee in a bedroom closet holding her child on his lap. The mother sought medical attention for her child and reported Chackee’s misconduct. The records reflect that, thereafter, Chackee admitted sexually assaulting the child on a number of occasions between August 2010 and January 2011. During this period, the child was between the age of 7 and 8 years old.

During today’s proceedings, Chackee pled guilty to Count 1 of the indictment. In his plea agreement, Chackee admitted that, on January 19, 2011, he assaulted a child under the age of 12 by inserting his finger into her vaginal opening in order to gratify his sexual desires.

This case was investigated by the FBI and the Shiprock Division of the Navajo Nation Department of Public Safety, and is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Charles L. Barth.

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