



November 16, 2012 – AP.org - Fort Sill Apache celebrate reservation anniversary

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. --

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) One year after being granted reservation status in New Mexico, the Fort Sill Apache raised their flag Friday on their 30-acre plot in the Akela Flats of southern New Mexico. But tribal Chairman Jeff Haozous says it will likely take generations to re-establish a true presence on tribal homelands.

That remains contingent, however, on resolution of the tribe's longstanding battle to build a casino on the reservation, and there has been little progress in the last year.

The casino is necessary for the tribe to be able to make money to expand the reservation and create the jobs necessary to lure tribal members back, Haozous said in a telephone interview.

But Gov. Susana Martinez opposes the casino, saying the tribe promised it would not establish gambling when that land was first put into trust a decade ago. Additionally, other tribes that operate casinos in the state have failed to line up in support of the proposal, and others have questioned the tribe's sincerity in seeking the reservation status as part of its quest to return to its New Mexico homelands.

Haozous, however, says he remains undeterred, and the tribe will submit its proposal to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

"My goal is the goal of my ancestors, to return my tribe to New Mexico," Haozous said.

"When I have met with officials, I remind them that my grandfather was born here before he was taken as a prisoner of war. Our last reservation was here before we got the one we have now. So while we are just starting, it is the only way that I can see we can return. And it's a process that will take generations."

The proposed casino has the support of community leaders in the Deming area, who are anxious for new jobs.

Tribal members, local elected officials, members of other tribes and others were among some 30 people who attended Friday's ceremony in Akela Flats, which included dancing, speeches and the raising of a tribal flag.

The tribe has a modular building on the site along Interstate 10 where it runs a roadside restaurant and smoke shop and has in the past tried to open gambling facilities.

Gaming officials say it is possible for the BIA to grant the reservation permission to operate a casino without Martinez's approval. But if it does, the state could go to court to fight the BIA, meaning the dispute could continue to drag on for years.

The Fort Sill Apache Tribe, which has about 700 members, is the legal successor of the Chiricahua, Warm Springs, Nednais and Bedonke bands of Apache Indians. They lived in southwestern New Mexico and Arizona until they were removed and made prisoners of war when Geronimo surrendered. They were first taken to Florida, then to Alabama and finally Oklahoma.

The tribe is now based in the town of Apache, Okla.

"The more resistance we get, the harder we work," Haozous said in a statement after the Friday ceremony. "Our ancestors did not give up and neither will we. We will return to New Mexico, to our ancestors and to our culture."