

Native Americans in Louisiana swamps seek tribal recognition

LAFITTE, La. (AP) — Giovanni R. Santini has done just about all he could to prove he's an American Indian over the decades he's lived in his Louisiana bayou town — even fighting with his fists to defend his blood-line with the Houma tribe.

“Every day at school they'd beat me up, bloody me up, for being Indian,” recalled the 80-year-old Santini, who's worked on tugboats, laid pipelines and built homes. “We became good fighters because they beat us up so much. Even teachers didn't like me ... We earned our respect with fights!”

Today the folks in Lafitte, this town of fishermen and oilfield workers, don't doubt he's a proud member of the 17,000-strong tribe of Houma Indians scattered over south Louisiana's bayou communities.

Not so for the federal government.

For decades, efforts by the Houma to become a federally recognized native American tribe have failed. It's a story common across the nation for dozens of groups that have come up short while trying to prove they should be treated as sovereign nations.

But this could change.

In June, the Obama administration hit the reset button on how a tribe becomes recognized by the



In this Oct. 30 photo, Giovanni R. Santini poses with a homemade bow and arrow during an interview in his home in Lafitte, La.

federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, or BIA. It's a sea change that's expected make it much less difficult for many tribes — including the Houma — to achieve tribal status.

The biggest difference is that a tribe now will have to prove its existence and cohesion starting only in 1900. Until now, tribes had to prove they'd been intact tribes — with unique identities, cultures and governance — dating to historical times. For the Houma, that meant tracing a history stretching back to 1682 when French explorers first wrote about them.

Besides the Houma, there are four other tribes alone in coastal Louisiana seeking sovereignty. And much is at stake: water rights, land

rights, fishing rights, mineral rights and millions of dollars in federal aid. Sovereignty also brings taxation and law-making powers.

For south Louisiana's native Americans, obtaining federal recognition could be a major step for impoverished American-Indian communities in their struggle to survive and hold onto ancestral lands disappearing along the Gulf. Traditionally, these communities lived off the riches of the marshes — fishing, trapping and foraging.

Places like Lafitte have been battered by coastal erosion, loss of fisheries and environmental assaults such as the catastrophic 2010 Gulf oil spill.

“It's definitely a fight for survival,” said Thomas

Dardar, chief of the United Houma Nation. “The coast is being washed out. We just go from one disaster after another.”

Facing such difficulties, the Houma tribe — which has been recognized as a tribe by the state — seeks to maintain its cohesion. It has a tribal council, sponsors cultural events, such as summer camps and pow wows, and has a cultural center in Golden Meadow.

It's far from clear what federal recognition would do for tribes pursuing claims over coastal lands rich in oil and gas. Most of south Louisiana is in private hands. But legal experts agreed that it was unlikely that Louisiana's coastal tribes suddenly would be given any large tracts.

“I don't think ConocoPhillips will have to turn all its lands over to the American Indians,” said Mark Davis, a Tulane University law professor and expert on Louisiana's coastal issues.

Lawyer Patty Ferguson, a member of the Pointe-Au-Chien tribe, hopes her tribe can at the least have more power to save Indian mounds, burial sites and other tribal areas eroding into the Gulf.

The federal government presently recognizes four tribes in Louisiana, though these were historically larger and intact tribes.

Obama: No credible intelligence about plot against U.S.

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama said there currently is no “specific and credible” intelligence indicating a terrorist plot on the United States, as he sought to reassure anxious Americans for the Thanksgiving holiday.

Speaking at the White House on Wednesday, Obama said it was understandable that Americans might be nervous following the Nov. 13 attacks in Paris, which killed 130 people and wounded hundreds more. While he encouraged Americans to remain vigilant, he urged people to go about their normal activities around Thanksgiving.

“While the threat of terrorism is a troubling reality of our age, we are both equipped to prevent attacks and we are resilient in the face of those who would try to do us harm,” Obama said. “And that's something we can all be thankful for.”

Obama spoke after a briefing with his national security team.

The president has faced criticism for his initial response to the Paris attacks, particularly his focus on chiding Republicans who called on him to be more aggressive in fighting Islamic State, the extremist group believed to be behind the deadly assault in France. He was also sharply critical

“We are resilient in the face of those who would try to do us harm.”

— Barack Obama

of lawmakers who backed legislation that would effectively keep refugees from Syria and Iraq — the two countries where the Islamic State is based — from coming to the U.S.

He shifted his focus Wednesday to Americans who may worry that the attacks in Paris, which took place at restaurants, a concert venue and a sports stadium, could be replicated in the U.S.

“I know that Americans have been asking each other whether it's safe here, whether it's safe to fly or gather,” he said. “I know that families have discussed their fears about the threat of terrorism around the dinner table.”

The president said that if intelligence were to reveal a credible threat to the U.S., the public would be informed. But he said Americans should feel confident in the work being done by national security and law enforcement.

“We are taking every possible step to keep our homeland safe,” he said.

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