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Seneca "on verge" of civil war

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Cattaraugus Reservation, N.Y.

At the reservation where three Senecas died in a shootout Saturday, tensions have been high since Dennis Bowen was elected Seneca president in November, then refused to step down when opponents on the tribal council voted to impeach him.

Bowen said the impeachment was illegal. Council members appointed Karen Bucktooth president.

"We're on the verge of a civil war," Rose Patterson, a Bowen aide said after the dawn shootout between feuding factions left three men dead.

The shooting at a tribal government building, occupied by Bowen supporters for more than a month, began when a group fired into the building and its occupants fired back, Erie County Sheriff Thomas Higgins said.

'BAM. BAM. BAM'

"There was a lot of loud arguing for three minutes, finally I heard nothing but shots fired: Bam. Bam. Bam. Bam. Bam. Bam," Seneca Marshal Les McComber said.

The three dead men — Myron Kettle, Samuel Powless and Charles Thompson — were Bucktooth supporters, both sides said. Powless is from the Six Nations Reserve. A fourth man, a Bowen supporter, was shot in the hand and leg.

Maj. Pedro Perez, who commands New York state police in the area, said authorities had not determined who fired first. No arrests were made, Perez said.

Troopers set up roadblocks to keep motorists away from the area.

Perez said state police and sheriff's deputies would maintain patrols on the reservation, which was quiet Saturday night.

"We're going to be here for quite some time. For the foreseeable future," Perez said.

Police cleared Bowen supporters from the office building. At another tribal office building occupied by Bucktooth followers, a Seneca nation flag flew at half-mast in honor of those killed.

Several Bucktooth supporters there were armed with assault rifles.

The Cattaraugus and nearby Allegany reserve have been the scene of recurring conflicts. In 1992, Senecas clashed with state police and blockaded highways to protest New York's effort to tax cigarette and gasoline sales on the reservations.

The Senecas consider their tribe a sovereign nation, where state laws do not apply.

Bowen and Bucktooth issued calls for peace but said they could not guarantee their supporters

would comply.

"Three lives have been taken from us," Bucktooth said.

"Would you say: 'OK, let's go home now? They killed them?'"

"'Fine, that's it?' I don't hear anybody saying that."

The two factions also clashed last month after a U.S. federal judge ruled Bucktooth's supporters could not sue Bowen in a state court. Two people were beaten up and another was shot in the arm before a meeting of Bucktooth supporters.

Both sides accused the other of carrying out driveby shootings that have left tribal office buildings pocked with bullet holes.

"Our main instructions in life are to live in peace," Bowen said.

"Guns on both sides characterize the loss of our spiritual teachings, our spiritual culture. Any time you lose your culture as Indian people, this is what happens."

Two mediators from the U.S. Justice Department arrived at the reservation Saturday afternoon but would not comment.



This is one of the 26,000 Peary caribou estimated to inhabit the Queen Elizabeth Islands in the far north in 1961. Only a quarter of them now survive and biologist Frank Miller has set out to find why.

AP Photo