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Iroquois protest state's tax plan

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SYRACUSE - Indian nations have been under siege since white people first arrived in North America, but the siege has grown more intense in recent years, Native Americans said at a conference Saturday. Indian nations in New York are facing a March deadline in a dispute with the state Tax Department, which is renewing efforts to collect taxes on reservation land. The nations see the efforts as a threat to their sovereignty.

Richard K. Nephew, council president of the Seneca Nation of Indians, said he didn't know how his nation will react.

"It's coming to a head for my people," he said, reminding the audience of 150 people of two prior standoffs at the nation's reservations in southwestern New York.

Twice the Seneca Nation blocked highways with a barricade of burning tires.

This time though, the nation has millions of casino dollars to oppose the tax collection, which it maintains violates its treaty rights.

Nephew said if the Seneca nation were a multinational corporation, the state government would be offering tax breaks and low-cost power.

"How can we provide tax-free zones, Empire Zones for private corporations, and ignore nations that have been here forever?" he asked.

The forum for the discussion was the annual Haudenosaunee Conference at Syracuse University's Center for Indigenous Law, Governance and Citizenship. Haudenosaunee is the name that the Iroquois people use for themselves.

Speakers also noted congressional efforts to limit tribes' abilities to profit from casinos they set up after the tribes were encouraged by a 1990 federal law to use casinos for economic development.

Congress is saying, said Oneida tribal council member Brian Patterson, "Yes, we wanted you to be successful, but we didn't want you to be that successful."

Robert Porter, dean of the Indigenous Center, asked Patterson, Nephew and Mohawk Chief James Ransom how they justify casinos in light of their tribal traditions, which scorned Western ways.

Nephew responded, "There seems to be a misconception that being poor is being traditional."

Indeed, he and others said that poverty has been a hallmark of reservation life for generations. But the Haudenosaunee were once rich in land and the resources that land and their individual talents brought, Nephew said.

Patterson grew up on the Seneca Cattaraugus reservation. He described sharing a one-room home with eight siblings, who fought over who got to sleep on the cold floor because it was roomier than the beds.

You don't need to travel abroad to see poverty, he said.

"You just need to look in your own back yard to see Third World conditions on reservations," he said, receiving a round of applause from the mostly Native American audience.

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