

Indians sue government, claim sex abuse

\$25 billion sought over Catholic-run boarding schools

By CHET BROKAW
Associated Press

ROSEBUD, S.D. — Sonny One Star says he learned not to cry or scream when he was beaten and sexually assaulted at his Roman Catholic boarding school on the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation.

Four decades later, he says it is time for a different approach.

"Today, I'm ready for retaliation," said One Star, a leader on the reservation.

He and five other Sioux are suing the federal government for \$25 billion on behalf of perhaps thousands of students allegedly abused at Indian boarding schools around the country. They hope to have the case certified as a class action.

"The nuns and the priests — the ones who are still living — I just want to let them know I'm coming after them," said One Star, 46, who attended the St. Francis Mission school, one of the three Catholic schools named in the lawsuit. "It was fun for them back then, but I want to get justice. I want to get even."

GARY FRISCHER, a Los Angeles consultant working on the case, said preparation for the legal action started last year amid news accounts that Catholic dioceses across the nation were settling lawsuits alleging abuse by priests. Little was being said about abuse in Indian schools.

Over the past century, hundreds of thousands of Indians attended boarding schools under a federal effort to get Indians to assimilate into white society.

Tribal leaders often asked religious organizations to start boarding schools on reservations so that their tribes' children would not be sent far away. Most of the schools were Catholic; most were closed or transferred to tribal control by the 1970s.

The lawsuit, filed in April in the U.S. Court of Federal Claims in Washington, accuses the government of failing to live up to treaties dating to the 1800s requiring it to protect tribes from, as the treaties put it, "bad men among the whites."

A spokesman for the Justice Department said federal officials will comment on the allegations only in court. The department's answer to the lawsuit is expected next month.

Sherwyn Zephier said he and other students were beaten with boards and leather straps at St. Paul's in Marty, the headquarters of the Yankton Sioux



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Tribe. Students also were forced to hold heavy books with their outstretched arms or kneel with their knees placed on broomsticks, he said.

"They did it in the name of God," said Zephier, now a teacher at the tribal school that replaced St. Paul's. "All that pertained to our culture was evil. They were trying to torture it out of us."

One Star said when he was a first-grader, a nun would keep him inside during recess to punish him for speaking English poorly. He said she took him into a closet, make him drop his pants, raised her dress and hummed church hymns while sexually abusing him.

ONE STAR said he later was beaten regularly with a wooden paddle and sexually assaulted by priests who grabbed boys out of bed in the dormitories.

"You could hear a pin drop when they came after you because everybody was listening. Then they'd turn the music up loud so you wouldn't hear the cries, you know," One Star said.

Besides St. Paul's and St. Francis, the lawsuit names Holy Rosary on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, which also educated Sioux children in South Dakota.

Lead attorney Jeff Herman of Hollywood, Fla., said more lawsuits will be filed in other states, naming other schools and adding Catholic organiza-

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years, said that he does not know whether the allegations are true. But he added: "If people were hurt in any way, it's our responsibility to try to heal that."

OFFICIALS of the Wisconsin Province of the Society of Jesus, which ran the St. Francis and Holy Rosary schools, also said they are investigating and want to provide pastoral care to anyone who might have been abused.

Not all former students back up the allegations.

"It didn't happen to me, and I never heard of it happening to anybody while I was at school," said 67-year-old Patrick Lee, an administrator at Oglala Lakota College on the Pine Ridge Reservation. He attended Holy Rosary from 1942 to 1953.

Floyd Hand, an Oglala Sioux spiritual leader who attended Holy Rosary, blames many students' later troubles, such as alcoholism, on the alleged abuse. He hopes any monetary award could pay for a healing center, to stop abuse from spreading to future generations.

Hand recalled one priest ridiculing his grandmother because she spoke only Lakota, the Sioux language.

Hand says he may be a medicine man and a spiritual leader, but he's ready to give the priest an old-fashioned beating if he ever sees him again.

"I'm waiting for him," Hand said.

tions as defendants.

Herman said that while the government might argue that the statute of limitations for raising such claims has run out, such a defense could be overcome by arguing that the defendants concealed the children's claims and that the abused youngsters were unable to take any action at the time.

Abbott Thomas Hillenbrand of Blue Cloud Abbey in northeastern South Dakota, which provided Benedictine priests to St. Paul's for nearly 100