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## Bill approved to settle tribes' land dispute

Associated Press

President Clinton on Friday signed legislation intended to end a decades-old land dispute between the Navajo and Hopi Indian tribes.

Under the Navajo-Hopi Land Settlement Act, the Hopis agreed to drop several lawsuits against the federal government and allow about 350 Navajo families to remain on Hopi land under conditional 75-year leases. The Navajo families also would be allowed to renew the leases for another 75 years.

"This historic settlement constitutes a courageous step by the people of two honorable tribes toward coexistence in peace and mutual respect," Clinton said in a statement.

The government will pay the Hopis \$50.2 million, which the tribe will likely use to buy up to 500,000 acres of trust land in northern Arizona. The land then would be considered part of the reservation.

Navajo Nation officials did not immediately return a call seeking comment. But many leaders recently have urged Clinton to not sign the deal, and some fear violence if the legislation is enforced.

Their objection centers on fears that the legislation only postpones a final settlement to sometime late in the century, and that the Hopis would interfere with the religious affairs of the 350 Navajos families living near Big Mountain on Hopi Partitioned Land.

The tribes have been quarreling over the land since the 1800s. The new legislation was worked out after a federal judge in 1991 ordered them to reach an agreement.

In order to receive the full \$50.2 million, the Hopis must get 85 percent of the Navajos living on Hopi Partitioned Land to agree to 75-year leases. If that can't be done by Dec. 31, the deal is dead, Navajo attorneys say.

Getting 85 percent to sign may be impossible.

Percy Deal, former director of the Navajo Nation's land-dispute office, said the Navajo families will never sign the lease as long as they think Hopi officials will harass them about religious traditions for the next 75 years.

and talk to the Navajo families and address these religious concerns, I think they would have a chance of getting that 85 percent figure they need," Deal said.

However, Hopi Chairman Ferrell Secakuku said late Friday that the Hopis have no plans to do any more negotiating with the Navajo families. He said he has no idea whether 85 percent of the Navajo families will sign the leases.

The only major Navajo leader who has been supportive of the settlement has been President Albert Hale, who has told the tribal council that "this is the best deal we can get and we should support it."

Hale continued to support the

settlement last week before the tribe's Intergovernmental Committee, which also refused to accept his position and told him that it would be improper to attend the signing by Clinton.

The bill signed Friday is an amended version of an agreement reached by the Navajos and Hopis.

Several amendments sparked controversy, such as one outlining the water rights the Hopis may have for the land they buy. A coalition of mayors and water users in northern Arizona had expressed concern the Hopis would get a disproportionate amount of water rights.

Contributing to this report was correspondent Bill Donovan.

"The question of what right will the Navajo families have to practice their own religion has never been addressed in the mediation process," said Deal, whose home is a stone's throw from Big Mountain.

If Navajo families wanted to hold a ceremony, Deal said, they would need permission from the Hopi Tribe, which would dictate where it could be held, how many could attend and whether they could build ceremonial structures.

Navajo opponents say the situation is akin to a company buying a small Arizona community and telling the residents that they can hold religious services, but not on Sunday and not with more than 12 persons attending any one service.

"If the Hopis would just sit down