

Sheriff recommends charges against some in Chukchansi casino clash

By Carmen George



Tex McDonald, leader of one of the tribal factions, leaves federal court, after the Chukchansi casino hearing. JOHN WALKER — Fresno Bee Staff Photo | [Buy Photo](#)

MADERA — Investigative reports have been completed by the Madera County Sheriff's Office regarding the Oct. 9 armed infiltration of Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino, which prompted the facility's closure the following day.

Madera County Sheriff John Anderson said the reports — completed Monday — identify at least 11 people. He's recommending six or seven felony charges be filed against each.

Anderson declined to share more information, stating the reports are still being reviewed by the district attorney's office. The investigation continues, and detectives said more requests for criminal charges may be filed with the prosecutor's office.

District Attorney Michael Keitz said the reports will get thorough review, but he could not comment further.

The news came as tribal factions, as well as state and federal officials, prepared for a hearing Wednesday in federal court in Fresno. The session will focus on whether the factions have made enough progress in completing audits and working together to satisfy a judge that the casino is safe enough to reopen to the public.

Before the sheriff's office made the announcement Tuesday, around 25 casino employees and tribal leaders attended

the Madera County supervisors meeting to urge elected officials to pressure Anderson and Keitz to more quickly investigate, press charges, and arrest those involved in violence at the casino.

Casey Cotroneo was among a few who addressed supervisors. The Visalia man was working at the casino as a lieutenant for Fresno-based STC Security, a contracted firm that's been augmenting casino security, when armed security representing a tribal faction led by Tex McDonald entered the casino in search of documents to complete late audits.

Cotroneo said he had six officers on duty that night. All were handcuffed except one who managed to get away "for the love of God," he said, choking up.

He said he was detained for nearly two hours before he was released. "I was repeatedly accosted, told that if I did not obey, I would be shot, I would be beaten."

Since then, Cotroneo said he's received many threatening phone calls at his home from members of the opposing security team, whose numbers are not traceable. The callers say, "We know where you live, we will be paying you a visit," Cotroneo said, adding he and his wife are "terrified."

Nancy Ayala, co-chair of one tribal faction, also addressed supervisors. The Oct. 9 incident was just the latest in a string of confrontations allowed to escalate at the Picayune Rancheria of Chukchansi Indians by Anderson and Keitz, Ayala said.

"I'm imploring you as the Board of Supervisors to take action. ... I hate to say it, but if this happened in Fresno County, it would have never gone this far. It would have been stopped long ago."

Ayala said casino surveillance footage showing McDonald punching a man on the ground, and another man pointing a gun at a group of security officers, has gone viral. "People are outraged."

The sheriff's office has been sifting through a number of allegations: Both security teams say they were acting in self-defense that night, and that the other side was the first to deploy a Taser. Both groups also allege guns were drawn by the other.

Before filing the investigative reports, Anderson said his office interviewed many people and reviewed surveillance videos and determined "what we could prove and what we couldn't and submitted it to the district attorney for charges."

When the sheriff's office arrived at the casino, Anderson said, "there were no guns, no violence." Anderson said he found four people handcuffed, which he "ordered released immediately" and was assured by an attorney representing McDonald's group, Mark Levitan, that "the whole thing was legal."

Anderson said that his office has "no idea who's in charge there." He vented frustrations about mounting leadership disputes at the rancheria since 2011. Anderson said he's hopeful the judge will help determine which tribal group should be in charge.

But regardless, local law enforcement has criminal jurisdiction over tribal lands in California via Public Law 280, said Amelia McLoughlin at Tuesday's meeting.

The Coarsegold woman was working as a security scheduler for the casino — which had to lay off nearly 1,000 of its employees since the facility was closed.

"If Sheriff Anderson had arrested those who were holding employees hostage, instead of setting them free, the assaults on casino employees never would have happened," McLoughlin said, referring to some confrontations that allegedly happened in the hotel-casino after law enforcement arrived. "As a resident of Madera County, my faith in our law enforcement has been shaken to the core ... "

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