

Indigenous Border Summit Opposes Border Wall and Militarization

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Indigenous peoples at the Border Summit of the Americas on Tohono O'odham tribal land opposed the construction of a border wall, which will dissect indigenous communities on ancestral lands split by the U.S.-Mexico border. They also issued a strong statement against the ongoing militarization of their homelands.

During the Border Summit, held Sept. 29-Oct. 1, organized by Tohono O'odham Mike Flores and facilitated by the International Indian Treaty Council and the American Indian Movement, indigenous peoples unanimously opposed the Secure Fence Act, passed by the Senate. The wall will divide the ancestral lands of many Indian Nations, including the Kumeyaay in California, Cocopah and Tohono O'odham in Arizona, and the Kickapoo in Texas. The wall is expected to be completed by May 2008.



American Indian singer, actor, and activist Floyd Westerman Red Crow greets Manny Pino, Acoma Pueblo, NM, professor and member of the International Indian Treaty Council, at the Border Summit of the Americas.

Photo: Brenda Norrell

Describing it as “psychological oppression and terrorism,” the participants representing many tribes from the United States and Mexico also called for a halt to the militarization of their ancestral homelands and sacred places along the border.

Tohono O'odham offered testimony on how their human rights are violated by the Border Patrol, immigration agents, and more recently the National Guard. The

KEY CHALLENGES

- ✦ The border wall divides ancestral lands, separates indigenous people from sacred places, and denies them the right to pass freely within their traditional lands.
- ✦ Heavy militarization of the border has led to defamation of the lands, harassment of indigenous members, and even death.
- ✦ In violation of international treaties, indigenous nations were not consulted prior to the application of anti-immigrant measures on their land such as Operation Hold the Line and Operation Gatekeeper.
- ✦ The Tohono O’odham tribal government has supported the U.S. government in denying immigrant rights and the rights of tribal members to aid immigrants.

Tohono O’odham’s tribal land of 2.8 million acres is located on the Arizona border and traditional lands span the border into the northern Mexico state of Sonora.

Members of the Tohono O’odham Nation said the proposed border wall would be a barrier to traditional routes of passage for ceremonies and traditional practices. The wall would interfere with O’odham ways for O’odham members living on both sides of the border who cross routinely for ceremonial, cultural, family, and health reasons. One Tohono O’odham father said increased border security has already made it impossible for his children to ride the bus to school because of harassment by border agents.

Bill Means of the International Indian Treaty Council noted that the U.S. government plans to build the southern border wall in violation of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, environmental laws, and other federal laws.

“This is a violation of indigenous peoples’ human rights and a violation of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples now being considered by the United Nations General Assembly,” Means asserted, noting that in 2005, Homeland Security waived all federal laws, including environmental laws, to complete the border fence in Southern California.

During the testimony, several indigenous representatives said the militarization and occupation of indigenous lands are in direct violation of indigenous peoples’ rights to economic, political, social, and cultural control of their lands.

One participant, Tohono O’odham Mike Wilson, also stated that his Nation has had no say in the state and federal programs implemented on its lands. He said he asked former Tohono O’odham Chairman Edward Manuel whether the Tohono O’odham Legislative Council was consulted before the United States’ Operation Gatekeeper or Operation Hold the Line were launched. Those two operations funneled migrants onto tribal land, where they often died in the desert.

According to Wilson, Chairman Manuel confirmed that the Tohono O’odham were never consulted.

Cross-border Indigenous Activism

Indian Nations are now uniting to take action in defense of ancestral lands, burial sites, and the environment. Earlier, the Kumeyaay opposed the border wall and said it would allow the U.S. government to “plow through” the burial places of their ancestors in Southern California. Members of the Kumeyaay Nation supported the Tohono O’odham in resisting the latest phase of wall-building.

Among those attending with a new vision of indigenous border solidarity was Mark Maracle, Mohawk, representing the Women Title Holders. Maracle presented Flores with two flags of solidarity and spoke of the need for unified action at the northern and southern borders.

He presented a statement of the Women Title Holders that said that native people can freely exercise their right to free transit at the northern border as established under

traditional and federal law by the Jay Treaty at the northern border.

It states, "... the Red Card indicates that a person is a Haudenosaunee/Six Nations Iroquois of Turtle Island. According to the Two Row Wampum Agreement, at all times we are free to pass and repass by land or inland navigation [or by air] onto our territories, that we are free to carry on trade and commerce with each other, that we shall not pay any duty or import whatever, that we are free to hunt and fish anywhere on our vast territory, and that we shall have free passage over all toll roads and bridges."

Wall Violates Indigenous Rights

During the summit, Tohono O'odham described how Border Patrol intrude into the homes of elderly O'odham without permission, hold people at gunpoint and ask for papers, and throw garbage in sacred sites on their patrols. Tohono O'odham described harassment by Border Patrol, including being tailgated in the vehicles, spotlighted in their homes, and held at gunpoint while being asked for papers on tribal land.

"As far as I am concerned the United States Border Patrol is an occupying army. If we were truly a sovereign nation, we would not have an occupying army on sovereign land," Wilson stated. He pointed out that the Border Patrol's "occupying army" has a military camp two miles north of the international border on Tohono O'odham tribal land in Arizona.

Wilson said O'odham, too, are migrants and most have moved about looking for work during their lives. Many of those dying in the desert are indigenous peoples, from Chiapas, Guatemala, Honduras, and other countries in Central and South America. "Where is our moral outrage?" Wilson asked the gathering. "We collectively in the social justice community turn away and let our brothers and sisters die."

Summit participants pointed out that the Tohono O'odham Nation law criminalizes transporting migrants, including a fine for the first offense and jail time for second offense. Means pointed out that in the event that a migrant was dying in the desert, an O'odham on tribal land would be charged with a crime for transporting the migrant to a hospital.

During the Border Summit, Angelita Ramon, Tohono O'odham, described how her son, 18-year-old Bennett Patricio, Jr., was run over and killed by the Border Patrol on April 9, 2001 in a deserted area of tribal land. Ramon, and Patricio's stepfather Irvin Ramon, said they believe Patricio witnessed a possibly illicit transfer of items by Border Patrol agents and was intentionally run over. The family's case against the Border Patrol is proceeding on federal appeal to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

"I'm here to let everyone know about the Border Patrol and how they killed my son," Angelita told the summit. She said the truth of what happened that night has still not been revealed.

Jimbo Simmons, member of the International Indian Treaty Council, said, "The Border Patrol is a death squad. They are operating like they do in Central and South America, because no one can hold them accountable."

Manny Pino of Acoma Pueblo said indigenous people all along the border are affected by the militarization. "As indigenous people, we didn't draw lines on the land," Pino told the summit. "It was all our Earth Mother."

Pino said the militarization of the border and the manipulation of truth follows in the pattern of the Indian Reorganization Act, which established systems of government that were "shoved down the throats" of Indian people in the United States in the 19th century.

Now, Pino said, the U.S. government is telling the Tohono O'odham Nation that if

the tribe does not allow the military on their lands, their federal funding will be cut off.

Pino added that nationwide, some American Indian people are being caught up in attitudes of racism toward migrants. This reflects a tactic that the U.S. government has long used to divide the people, he noted, citing the example of the so-called Navajo and Hopi land dispute.

He pointed out that it is important for Indian people to recognize the real enemy. “It is George Bush, Homeland Security, the Patriot Act, and the people who want to tap our phone lines,” Pino concluded.

Reflecting the comments of many in the border area, Pino said a border wall would not stop the people from coming across. “The ‘Tortilla Curtain’ will be torn. The real challenge for indigenous peoples is to ‘decolonize’ the mind.”

One Man Makes a Difference

The Baboquivari District on Tohono O’odham lands has one of the highest rates of migrant deaths on the border. Mike Wilson, Tohono O’odham, has challenged the Tohono O’odham Nation to become “morally responsible,” and take actions to prevent deaths on tribal lands.

Wilson began to put out water for migrants when they started to die in disproportionate numbers in 2001. Since then, between 240 and 250 migrants have lost their lives each year in the Sonoran Desert. Of those, 70 to 90 have died on O’Odham lands. He states simply, “Let me be very, very clear, hopefully, in what I’m trying to do. No one deserves to die in the Arizona Sonora Desert for want of a cup of water.”

Wilson does volunteer work with Humane Borders away from tribal land, but his actions on tribal land are as an individual. The Tohono O’odham tribal government has halted humanitarian groups from coming

onto tribal land to render aid, he said. He urged that the tribal government be held accountable for its callous inaction. “We who were once oppressed, are ever increasingly becoming the oppressor.”

The Tohono O’odham tribal Attorney General’s Office and Superintendent of Public Safety earlier told Wilson to stop maintaining the water stations for migrants. Both offices threatened him with banishment as a tribal member and said, “Under penalty of banishment you must cease putting out water.” However, when asked about the banishment, Chairman Manuel responded, “You are O’odham, no one can banish you.”

Wilson appears in the film, “Crossing Arizona,” shown at the Border Summit, which includes his efforts of putting out water in gallon jugs and barrels, and testing for impurities, on a weekly basis at stations. During the summit, he shared more of one migrant man’s story documented in the film. Wilson said he told the man in the desert that if he goes north, he would be dead within a few hours. The man said he would rather die in the desert than return to Mexico and watch his wife, who needs surgery, and his children, starve to death.

The reasons for Wilson’s actions go beyond altruism and touch on his fundamental beliefs and the experiences that led him to his activism. Over the past five years, he has witnessed migrants dying of thirst on tribal land, including a seven-year-old girl with blood in her urine who barely survived.

“All human life is sacred ... When it comes to people dying in the desert, we are all equal.” When one undercover detective asked him whose authority he was acting on, Wilson replied, “The man upstairs.”

Threats to a Traditional Way of Life

The impact of the border wall and militarization on communities were not the only

threats to Native American way of life that were denounced at the Summit. Pointing out that the fragile desert ecosystem and all of its creatures will be affected, Maracle said, “The environmentalists should be up in arms.”

Representatives of the Tarahumara in Northern Mexico also spoke out against the devastating effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Urging a halt to trade policies that are leading to unemployment in the Americas, the summit called for nullification of the North American Free Trade Agreement and other trade agreements.

Other indigenous peoples from the Americas said that genetically modified seeds are destroying the peoples’ crops and their health. They also opposed corporate profiteering by Halliburton’s Kellogg, Brown, and Root. This company, accused of profiting off corporate contracts in Iraq, is now under contract to build migrant prisons.

The Border Summit also opposed anti-Indian legislation in Arizona, including Proposition 103 English-only, Prop. 200 voter identification, and Prop. 300 proof of citizenship for services.

Local, state, and federal governments were told to recognize the international rights of indigenous peoples as upheld by the United Nations, treaty rights, and the sovereignty of American Indians. They were also mandated to obtain prior permission before entering onto or engaging in construction or development on indigenous lands.

During the Border Summit, indigenous peoples called for removal of the existing Border Patrol detention center for migrants on Tohono O’odham tribal land near San Miguel, AZ.

Tohono O’odham described how Border Patrol agents occupied sacred sites, including Baboquivari Peaks, the sacred place of the Creator I’itoi. Dennis Manuel, Tohono O’odham spiritual keeper of the traditions, said the Border Patrol—now under Homeland Security—occupied the sacred area of I’itoi and refused to leave the area. Manuel took his plea for help to the United Nations. When the Border Patrol did later leave, he said, they left their garbage strewn in the sacred area.

On the third day of the summit, the indigenous participants drafted a proclamation with recommendations for direct action:



Tohono O’odham Mike Flores, organizer of the Border Summit of the Americas, receives the gift of a flag as a gesture of border solidarity from Mohawk Mark Maracle.

Photo: Brenda Norrell

PROPOSALS AND DEMANDS

- ✘ The United Nations is asked to intervene and prevent the United States from violating federal laws to build the border wall. These laws protect American Indian burial sites and traditional routes of passage necessary for ceremonies, which are vital for the continuance of traditional lifeways.
- ✘ American Indian tribes are urged to use federal laws, including the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, and other laws protecting Indian cultural and burial sites and environmental laws, to halt construction of the border wall.
- ✘ The government of Mexico is asked to demand an environmental impact statement by the United States before construction of the border wall begins in the fragile desert ecosystem.
- ✘ The Border Summit calls for the nullification of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and other trade agreements, which are resulting in widespread hunger and desperation for indigenous peoples in the Americas.
- ✘ The Border Summit demands a halt to the dissemination, export, and distribution of genetically modified seeds, particularly corn and other grains.
- ✘ The summit calls for the creation of a new human rights office in conjunction with the Tohono O'odham Nation.
- ✘ The Bennett Patricio, Jr., Memorial Human Rights Fund was established to assist the families of indigenous border victims, including attorneys and court costs.
- ✘ The Tohono O'odham Nation is urged to establish water stations and develop the goal of zero migrant deaths on tribal lands from dehydration and heat exhaustion.
- ✘ Educational campaigns are encouraged to inform migrants that Indian people in the United States are not their enemy, and their lands and people should be respected.
- ✘ Camera and camcorder patrols are to be created, with Indian youths encouraged to carry cameras and video cameras to document the treatment of people at the border, carrying out regular patrols to the homes of elderly and people with special needs.
- ✘ Stockholder direct action campaigns will be organized, including a campaign to inform Boeing stockholders of the sovereignty of Indian lands and federal laws protecting burial places, traditional routes of passage, and the fragile ecosystem of the desert.
- ✘ The Tohono O'odham Nation is urged to set a date for the time when the Border Patrol will leave sovereign tribal land. Tohono O'odham should be trained to provide their own border security.
- ✘ Indigenous classes in language, accurate history, and cultural continuity and the right of O'odham children to school transportation are to be increased.
- ✘ Indigenous peoples are urged to create their own newspapers and radio stations so their own voices can be heard.
- ✘ The Border Summit encouraged efforts to address racism and xenophobia within tribes and establish protocol for conflict resolution within and between tribes to achieve unity.
- ✘ Mexico is urged to establish a living wage and take earnest steps to eradicate poverty.
- ✘ The Border Patrol is obliged to observe mandatory speed laws and other tribal, state, and federal laws.
- ✘ The United States is urged to adopt the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and abide by Article 35, which recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples whose lands are separated by international borders and their right to continue their spiritual and cultural practices.
- ✘ States within the United States are advised that free, prior, and informed consent of Indian people is required before states or corporations begin any development on sovereign Indian lands. Combat ingrained racism throughout Brazilian society.

Michelle Cook, Navajo law student, noted that the protection of burial places is vital. “If there are ancestral remains, they have to stop development. They have to repatriate those remains. However, it is the native peoples’ responsibility to make them accountable. We have to go out there and watch them to make the accountable.”

During the Border Summit, American Indian actor and activist Floyd Westerman Red Crow showed a work in progress, the first in a series of films revealing the genocide of American Indians. The first segment tells how Indian people in California were targeted for systematic genocide by the delivery of blankets infected with small pox. The state and federal government also paid bounties for Indian heads and scalps as the gold rush progressed.

Westerman performed in concert with American Indian singer Keith Secola. Before the Border Summit began, a traditional sweat was held for purification purposes and tobacco offered in the traditional way.

At the conclusion of the Border Summit, Jose Garcia, lieutenant governor of the O’odham in Mexico, said the most important aspect of the summit was bringing O’odham people together with other indigenous peoples to work to resolve issues. “It brought us together in unity.”

The testimony was aired live on radio in the Tucson area and on the Internet, with listeners responding around the world, including e-mails of appreciation from listeners in Alaska, the Dominican Republic, and Europe. The audio file archives will be available online at Earth Cycles (see Resource List below).

Brenda Norrell has been a news reporter in Indian country for 23 years, working as a staff reporter for Navajo Times and Indian Country Today and as an AP correspondent during the 18 years she lived on the Navajo Nation. She is currently a freelance writer based in Tucson and a contributor to the IRC Americas Program, online at www.americaspolicy.org.

Resources

Earthcycles (Audio link)

<http://www.earthcycles.net>

Humane Borders

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Mohawk Nation News

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