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Border hearing slices through hype

Tohono O'odham, others reveal life in a militarized zone

TUCSON, Ariz. - Rep. Raul Grijalva and others heard from indigenous whose communities are located on both sides of the border, along with other border residents describing the realities of death in the desert and the hidden agendas of those profiteering from the sudden attention to the southern border, at a public hearing held Aug. 17.

While testimony focused on human rights at the national border hearing at the Armory Park Community Center downtown, outside members of the Border Guardians burned a Mexican flag. Before the testimony began, one Border Guardians member was arrested for harassing and yelling at those arriving at the hearing.

In response to the ongoing national Republican-sponsored border hearings held at other locations, Grijalva, D-Ariz., said those were "'road shows.'" Grijalva attended the hearing in Tucson hosted by the Coalicion de Derechos Humanos and the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

With the theme "'Communities on the Line: the Impacts of Militarization and Impunity,'" testimony called for fair and just immigration reform.

Mike Wilson, Tohono O'odham, told Grijalva and others on the listening panel that the Tohono O'odham Nation must be held accountable for migrants who are dying from dehydration on Tohono O'odham tribal lands.

"'What is the [Tohono O'odham] Nation doing to prevent migrant deaths on tribal lands?'" said Wilson, who places water in containers on Tohono O'odham tribal lands for migrants as a humanitarian action without the support of the tribal government.

Baboquivari District on the Tohono O'odham Nation is one of the areas with the highest number of migrant deaths due to heat exposure and dehydration in the international border region, according to Humane Borders.

Pima County Supervisor Richard Elias, on the listening panel, reiterated Wilson's comments in his summary and stated the Tohono O'odham must be held accountable for actions regarding the deaths of migrants.

Pascua Yaqui from Arizona, Aurelio Alipa Valencia and Mario Gamboa Leyva, said their U.S. passports appear to be worthless, since border agents harass and threaten Yaqui who hold U.S. passports upon re-entry at the Arizona border.

Recently, Alipa attempted to re-enter the U.S. with his U.S. passport, but a border agent threatened and intimidated him.

"'Anyone could have given you that,'" the border agent told Alipa. The agent assumed Alipa was Mexican and told him to get a U.S. visa. Later, when Alipa tried to make a formal complaint against the agent, he was repeatedly told that the U.S. border representative was on vacation and was then referred to another agent, then another.

Gamboa, supporting Alipa's testimony during the hearing, tossed his passport aside and said it must be worthless.

David Garcia, Tohono O'odham, said he came to be present in solidarity with others testifying and pointed out that he had personally invited Tohono O'odham Chairman Vivian Juan-Saunders, who did not attend.

During the public testimony, Halliburton was named by border residents as one of those profiteering from the Bush-fueled attention and media frenzy at the southern border.

The Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg Brown & Root was awarded a contract worth up to \$385 million for building temporary immigration detention centers. Halliburton, the subsidiary criticized for overcharging the Pentagon for its work in Iraq and which was previously led by Vice President Dick Cheney, will build the centers for Homeland Security in the event of an unexpected influx of immigrants.

Speaking on structural violence toward migrants at the hearing, Yendi Castillo, Tucson defense attorney, said two of her clients were healthy when they entered prison.

'They died in prison,' Castillo said.

Pima County Medical Examiner Bruce Parks said in 2001, there were 80 deaths of persons in transit classified as migrants, including 14 in one group. In 2005, the number increased to 197. The primary cause of death was exposure to the heat, followed by undetermined causes (due to rapid decomposition caused by heat) and the third is traffic crashes (primarily resulting from patrol pursuits).

Bianca Encinias of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice described how she grew up in Albuquerque, N.M., where community water sources are contaminated. Encinias also pointed out that New Mexico was the site where the atomic bomb was first tested.

Encinias said American Indians in New Mexico are now suffering from high rates of cancer and other diseases because of widespread uranium mining in Indian communities.

After stating that there is a need to reconnect with the Earth, she said, 'We have a responsibility to ensure the health and safety of our communities.'

The Center for Biological Diversity said a proposed border wall is 'a colossal environmental disaster' which will not stem illegal immigration.

The proposed triple wall of more than 370 miles of the U.S./Mexico border is opposed by many traditional Tohono O'odham who say it will close their traditional route to ceremonies.

The CBD said the militarization of the region, low-flying aircraft, roads and border wall will further stress the fragile ecosystem of the border region, home to the cactus pygmy owl and Sonoran pronghorn in Arizona. It is also home to the flat-tailed horned lizard and peninsular range bighorn sheep in California. The triple wall, the length of the border, would block critical wildlife migration and destroy valuable habitat, according to the center.

Currently the Border Patrol operates in eight federally protected areas in Arizona.