

Immigration, Imperialism and Cultural Genocide:

An interview with O’odham Activist Ofelia Rivas concerning the effects of a proposed wall on the US / Mexico border

Interviewed by, Jeff Hendricks

Imperialism – lately this word has been re-entering debate and speech around the country. For the most part, these days, the word imperialism is being used to describe the actions of the United States government as it seeks to gain control over Middle Eastern governments and economies. The continuing occupation of Iraq by the United States is the best example of this neo-imperialism.

But imperialism is not limited to lands across the oceans, and the United States government is currently engaged in the occupation of lands much closer to home. We must never forget that the very lands claimed by the government of the United States in North America are claimed by nothing other than the right of conquest. The United States government is a government of occupation here in North America and the lands that it continues to claim and occupy are in spirit still the autonomous territories of the indigenous tribes that existed here before the first European colonists stepped foot on the continent.

Since 9/11 the United States government has ratcheted up its attacks against the indigenous residents of the United States. In southern Arizona, these attacks have come in the guise of borderland defense. The traditional O’odham residents of southern Arizona have become the victims of a joint program carried out by the Department of Homeland Security and the Border Patrol to build a border wall across the entire 330 mile U.S / Mexico border, a 65 mile section of which will run along the southern edge of the Tohono O’odham reservation. This wall, if it is allowed to be built, will effectively cut in half the traditional territory of the O’odham and serve to disrupt traditional migration patterns and isolate O’odham villages that exist on opposite sides of the international border. To justify the building of this wall the government has once again used the fear of terrorism, as has become common since 9/11, to advance its fascistic imperialist interests.

In a Time Magazine article dated September 20, 2004, entitled “Who left the door open” one can find a perfect example of the fear mongering about “*terrorist threats*” being used by the corporate media and government to justify the militarization of the border zone and the building of a border wall. Although the Time article does not specifically mention the proposed wall, it does mention the Tohono O’odham nation as being a specific weak spot in the border defense. The article states that “*Law-enforcement authorities believe the mass movement of illegals, wherever they are from, offers the perfect cover for terrorists seeking to enter the U.S...*” Even the 9/11 commission chimes in on this absurd talking point in its report stating that: “*two systemic weaknesses came together in our border system's inability to contribute to an effective defense against the 9/11 attacks: a lack of well-developed counter terrorism measures as a part of border security and an immigration system not able to deliver on*

its basic commitments, much less support counter terrorism. These weaknesses have been reduced but are far from being overcome.”

This last statement is especially ridiculous considering that none of the accused 9/11 hijackers crossed into the United States through its border with Mexico. Despite such evident absurdity, the government obviously feels that it can count on the ignorance and apathy of the American public to give it free reign as it moves to completely seal the border between the United States and Mexico. In fact, it seems that a small minority of deluded and frightened residents of this country have fallen for the government campaign of terrorist fear mongering and economic scapegoating of immigrants.

The visible rise of racist vigilante groups such as the Minute Man project and Save our State are part of the very dangerous right wing consolidation of power taking place here in North America. It is essential for every resident of this land who does not agree with the racist nationalism being forced upon us in this country to rise up and stop this tide of fear based fascism before it is consolidated. Hundreds of thousands of migrants from the south have risen in a nationwide movement to resist this new wave of racism and fascistic demagoguery – now it is essential that the rest of us join them to resist the militarization of the U.S./Mexico border. It should go without saying that given the current trajectory of the Bush regime, a sealed border should be of grave concern to anyone living in North America – don’t forget that a sealed border can serve to keep people in just as well as it can serve to keep others out!

The following is an interview conducted in 2006 with Ofelia Rivas, a traditional O’odham woman who is organizing to resist the building of the border wall across the O’odham territory. The traditional territory of the O’odham is comprised of land on both the U.S and Mexican side of the border, and if the wall is completed it will severely limit the traditional passage between O’odham villages on opposite sides of the border, resulting in a disruption of familial and ceremonial continuity. This is the essence of why the building of the wall must be opposed. Ofelia’s words will tell the rest of the story.

Q: What are the stated reasons given by the government for wanting to build the border “wall” through the O’odham territory?

A: National security – a risk to national security due to open borders.

Q: In what ways are the tribal government and police working with the Department of Homeland Security/Border Patrol to plan for the building of the wall?

A: The Tohono O’odham Nation has allowed the Federal government to control the northern territory and allows human rights violations to occur. It refuses to oppose the harassment, home invasions, tailgating at high speeds and deaths of the O’odham caused by the United States Border patrol and other agencies (FBI, special drug agents, US customs, special rescue forces on the reservation, etc.). The Tohono O’odham Nation publicly supports the presence of the Border patrol and have made requests for aid and

have received “surplus equipment’ including weapons and an increase of agents in the territory.

At the initial proposal of sealing the border, the Department of Homeland Security and the tribal government used fear tactics as they campaigned for the support of the “wall” throughout the reservation. They claimed that the security of the O’odham was in jeopardy. One local political leader went as far as telling a community directly adjacent to the border that Al-Qa’ida was going to bomb their community if they didn’t close off the border. The community politicians agreed to the building of the “wall”, even though it closes off the ancestral routes crossing the border. A particular route that will be sealed is one the O’odham use to attend one of the most sacred surviving ceremonies held in Mexico. At the urging of the elders, the traditional leaders and ceremony leaders requested a meeting with the Tribal Administrators to discuss the impacts on the culture that would be made by the “wall” and to discuss the unsafe border crossing conditions for ceremony participants, as well as other issues such as protection of sacred sites and ceremony grounds. The traditional leaders were ignored and to this day the sacred sites are unprotected and the ceremony routes that cross the border are unsafe. However, the O’odham still travel this route through areas controlled by the border patrol and the Mexican Territorial Army.

Today, the numbers of armed Border Patrol and non-O’odham Tribal Police are increasing. The people have been misinformed and their concerns disregarded. All complaints about the border patrol were twisted and used by the tribal government to request federal and state funding. Most of the testimonials/complaints were taken down in the O’odham language. The Tohono O’odham Nation claims to be a sovereign nation, but it is not a true sovereign nation, as it does not manage its own affairs, especially dealing with the International Boundary. A sovereign nation would create an environmental protection force to safeguard the nations land and manage its lands by creating its own passport based on aboriginal rights. This would provide for safe border crossing for the O’odham. A sovereign nation would protect its people.

Q: What interest does the tribal government have in working with the Government to help build this wall? Why is there a specific focus on the O’odham lands by the Government?

A: The increased drug trafficking and human trafficking started funneling through the O’odham territory when the United States decided to re-channel the traffic flow of immigrants through O’odham territory with operations such as “Operation Gatekeeper”¹ The increased border patrol forces in Texas, New Mexico and California forced the traffic to flow through O’odham territory. The government felt the plan would deter traffickers due to the extreme conditions of the area such as excessive heat during the summer and extreme cold during the winter nights as well rough desert terrain that has no accessible water. However, the tribe was not equipped to handle this onslaught of people coming through O’odham lands. The tribal government then accepted federal assistance not only to increase their police force, but also to increase agents on the reservation to “assist” their efforts to monitor the border.

Prior to the 9-11 “attack on America,” Washington D.C. politicians toured the border along the reservation and declared that they were not responsible for the existing

cattle fence, stating that the United States government marked the border only with markers. (The tribe was seeking federal assistance to repair the cattle fence along the border due to cattle rustling and increase of drug trafficking). But now, after 9-11, the reservation is under the department of homeland security control, a police state, just like apartheid in South Africa. O'odham now have to carry documents to prove they are O'odham in order to move around on their own lands. The reservation is now closed off to the media and anyone voicing resistance against this situation face serious consequences such as harassment, arrest and a loss of public services from the tribal programs.

One example of this harassment is my personal case. The non-O'odham tribal police in my mother's village along the international border arrested me. I was held in a police vehicle for an hour under interrogation by a policeman, while two border patrol vehicles blocked the entrance to my mother's yard. I was told to cooperate or face five charges: failure to stop, failure to show I.D., interfering with the Border patrol and two counts of aggressive behavior toward an officer. I was un-handcuffed and told to get out of the vehicle countless times as different tribal police arrived. When one non-O'odham tribal police officer arrived he was told there was a little misunderstanding and it was resolved. This causes me to seriously question the governments' motives, they are trying to outright pacify the O'odham. They violate every protected human right we have and ignore our specific indigenous aboriginal rights. They control O'odham lands through psychological warfare.

One major "problem" that has not been discussed, is the unknown number of young O'odham incarcerated in federal and state prisons who have become victims of this "operation gatekeeper." The O'odham reservation has 97 percent unemployment – young people have been forced into drug trafficking and human trafficking to buy their "American dream." Many of these young people are given severe sentences and do not receive legal assistance from the tribal system. Many of these young people have never been arrested or committed any offenses but now sit in prison awaiting sentences. The young people returning from prison are forced into halfway houses and are not allowed to return home to their families, they completely lose all rights as citizens of the United States. This is a conspiracy to force the total assimilation of the O'odham and neutralize the O'odham lands. This psychological warfare on the O'odham is genocide, a genocide that many will not realize until generations to come.

Q: Can you explain what is meant by "traditional" O'odham as opposed to other more modern or assimilated O'odham.

A: Tohono (tho-ho-no) means desert and O'odham (o'o -tham) means people.....desert people. The O'odham refer to themselves as O'odham (the people). The tribal government system, the Tohono O'odham Nation (formerly the Papago Tribe), was mandated by the United States government. This system was made to coincide with the United States federal government system. This system was and is a foreign system of government to the O'odham.

This system changed the society of the O'odham. The O'odham were forced to assimilate and live under this mandate to receive assistance. The children were forced into boarding schools thousand of miles from O'odham lands. Many O'odham were

forced into relocation projects by the federal government. The people were confused and some got lost. Some O'odham wanted the American dream and forgot about their language and way of life, the Him'dag. The tribe employs non-O'odham to manage the cultural affairs office. The top managers of the tribal enterprises, such as the casino, are non-O'odham. The legal staff employed by the tribe is non-O'odham. All this occurs while the reservation has severely impoverished people with poor housing conditions. In the federal housing project the homes are in disrepair and some homes have only partial roofs. In areas where the traditional people continue to hold on to the Him'dag, there is no electricity or running water. Many O'odham are just tired of the foreign system that governs them and imposes these conditions. The recent tribal elections have shown that O'odham are apathetic to their condition. They don't vote because they know conditions will not change for them.

When the foreign system was established, there was already a form of government practiced in the villages and there still is a traditional government remaining in the isolated communities along the U.S. / Mexico international border. In the traditional system, the ceremonial leaders inherit their titles and responsibilities from the beginning of time. In the traditional village government system, the villages have their leadership through inheritance and ability. These two elements work together to form the original type of government practiced by the O'odham, this is the traditional form of government. The traditional government is based in the Him'dag and adheres to the mandate given to us by the Creator and taught to us by our Elder Brother I'toi. Our teachings are based on the land and sacred places on the land. It is based on living in harmony with our environment. The traditional O'odham are the O'odham that still practice this original form of government.

Q: Is there really an “illegal immigration” problem on the reservation? In an article written in Time Magazine a while back it was stated that the O'odham tribal government resources are being “taxed” by illegal immigration. Is this propaganda? Is this the real reason that the government wants to build this fence or do they have a hidden agenda?

A: The “illegal immigration” problem became a problem on O'odham lands when the United States government redirected the flow of “illegal trafficking” from Texas and California and funneled the flow through O'odham lands, federal lands on the United States side and isolated O'odham communities and farms and ranches on the Mexican side. In the name of “national security” the American system clamps down on “illegal immigration.” “Illegal immigration” from Mexico has now become an immense threat according to the government.

The so-called “terrorist act” on America is propaganda; America was founded on terrorist acts upon Indigenous peoples of these lands. The truth of the matter is that most Americans live in denial of the criminal acts of genocide and massacre and forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples of these lands. The truth is the threat against national security is used as the basis for the increased “monitoring” of the borders and “enforcement” of immigration laws and criminalization of humanitarian acts by the O'odham and other peoples. The real “problem” is racism and discrimination; the majority of the people coming from Mexico are brown skinned and poor. The Tohono

O'odham Nation of course is taxed; they are not equipped to handle the increased flow through the lands. The tribal operations, only 10 years ago was an estimated 95 percent funded by the Federal and State governments. The recent enterprises of casinos brought a ray of self-sufficiency but with the reservation now under federal control due to the "threat of national security," the tribe has lost their ray of self-governance.

Q: According to the Department of Homeland Security, "illegal immigrants" are using the O'odham reservation lands to cross into the United States. How many of these people are immigrants from Southern Mexico and how many are native O'odham who are just trying to travel within their traditional lands?

A: Statistically, the documentation of O'odham that are abused and deported is unknown. When family members do not come home, families wait, as there is no system set up to find information from the department of homeland security. When the build-up of border patrol along the border increased, the fear in the O'odham increased. O'odham fear retaliation from not just the federal government but the local tribal police and tribal politicians. O'odham that have made statements [against the department of homeland security] receive reprisals in such things as no social services from the reservation programs and harassment from the federal agents and tribal police. Today, the O'odham will not talk about abuse from the Border Patrol agents or the tribal police. Personally I have talked to a number of O'odham that have been harassed by the border patrol and by the tribal police. One O'odham woman told me that in the middle of the night a group of troops knocked at her door, masked, wearing all black clothing and heavily armed, woke her children (ages ranging from 20 to 8) and interrogated them. When she reported this to the tribal police she received no action. Some period later the tribal police admitted to have conducted this type of operation as she was suspected to traffic drugs. This woman does not traffic drugs but does support the traditional people.

As for the border patrol abuse, O'odham have no rights. An elderly couple while under interrogation was forced to show a shopping/groceries list to prove that their travel on the road was justified. The border patrol can drive their vehicle into your yard and hold you at gunpoint and can confiscate your tribal identification card and make a request for further proof of "American citizenship."

The majority of "illegal immigrants" are indigenous people from Mexico and Central America. Today many O'odham have not been crossing the border through ancestral routes – except for the "traditional O'odham" that continue to travel back and forth to their families and to conduct ceremonies.

Q: Given that the proposed fence will make travel between O'odham villages on opposite sides of the border much harder – In what ways will this wall further degrade and destroy traditional O'odham culture?

A: The traditional O'odham culture mandated by the Creator, and taught by our Elder Brother I'toi in our teachings, designated areas of most importance to the O'odham. These are areas of significant importance and the overall sacredness of the entire original lands of the O'odham. All these areas have a significant part of the Him'dag – the way of life of the O'odham. Some place might be designated for the men or for the women;

some places might hold special clays for birthing ceremonies or death ceremonies. Some place might have special rites of passage for medicine people. Some place is where ceremonies are held. All these places have songs and grow special herbs and medicines that the O'odham use.

The significant demise of the O'odham culture begun at the coming of the foreign religions but the greatest impact was the loss of mobility upon the land. The O'odham face restrictions to continue vital pilgrimages to holy sites. We are required to carry document to travel on our lands. The dissecting of O'odham lands also caused segregation and discrimination against the O'odham. Some O'odham didn't see a problem in government handouts such as government food rations, government commodities, then finally government social aid.

The traditional O'odham saw this as dependence and laziness, but more importantly it infringed upon the O'odham beliefs of taking care of the lands and living in harmony. The O'odham today no longer gather many desert foods to maintain the balance in the environment. The food gathering involved singing special songs and conducting ceremonial dances and acknowledging our way of life, which is the balance of our lands. The United States government and the establishment of the reservation do protect some of these areas, but the lands exposed to extensive degradation are the lands in Mexico. Towns and agricultural farms now occupy many of the sacred sites. An example is the town of Sonoita in Sonora, Mexico that once was the village of Shon Oidag. The Mexican settlers bulldozed the burial sites of the O'odham and build their homes on top of this area. The living decedents were powerless to defend this area, as after all they are just indios, a slang insult in Mexico. Congress recently approved a bill that in 2008 all people entering the US will be required to have a passport. Many traditional O'odham do not have birth records that are required to obtain a passport. The sealing of the international boundary is the demise of the remaining O'odham way of life.....legal cultural genocide.

Q: I know that you have had interaction with the United Nations about the violation of Indigenous rights perpetrated against the O'odham by the United States Government. Can you explain what kind of support you have gotten from the U.N. specifically as well as other "activist" groups? What kinds of support has the effort to stop the building of the wall received from off the reservation?

A: The wall and the increased military on O'odham land and the actual impact on the O'odham (the people) does not concern local non-tribal people. In fact very few non-O'odham even really know about the O'odham. In the city of Tucson you'll find more information on Apaches then you would the original people of the territory. Everyone that did have knowledge about the O'odham had the idea, in their stereotypical mindset, that the federal government "took care" of us O'odham and that we didn't have any complaints.

The gaming craze that hit all tribes in the United States years ago did force the state government to wake up since this gaming was bringing in revenue for the state. Now the idea of Indian people having rights, and discussing justice for violation of these rights, does not seem like something any Indian should be complaining about, after all most people think we are being cared for with the gaming money.

I am a member of a women's organization, First Nations North & South, from New Mexico, which works directly with the Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico. This group sends a delegation to the first session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The United Nations, a 45+ year old organization, was finally going to begin to address thousands of global concerns of the Indigenous Peoples. During my first attendance at the forum I was encouraged to bring our issues directly, as well as request for intervention on our immediate problems. Our sacred ceremonial grounds were planned for excavation in Mexico and I requested for an intervention, which was addressed by assignment of an attorney that was directed to work with the tribal government. The excavation was successfully stopped. Unfortunately the attorney neglected to remain in contact with the U.N. and has not continued to work toward the permanent protection of our ceremonial sites.

An unofficial visit by the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous Peoples, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, came to Tucson and met with the *Cu:Wi I-gersk* elders. The Special Rapporteur's only assistance was to include our concerns about human rights violations and O'odham rights violations due to the militarization of the border, and the impact of the wall on the O'odham, in his official report to the United Nations Human Rights High Commission.

An official visit by a UN official requires an "official invitation" by the United States government to address human rights violations and as we well know, the U.S. will not admit to ongoing human rights violations occurring not just to Indigenous peoples but all humanity in the country. The most important outcome of our group attending the UN-PFII was networking, a term I just always heard. I met people from all over the world; we shared our individual concerns and our common problems. These people have become my family; we all share our ongoing problems and try to assist each other in solutions. Since we are all grassroots people our common problem is lack of economic resources to address our basic needs.

The support from activists groups and especially youth has been tremendously important. Some local organizations unfortunately saw our authenticity as original people of this territory as a threat to funding resources and did not embrace us. There are a few that eventually did recognize us. Today we have built a very reliable group that share information, especially through the internet. Our most important allies have been the youth from our Indigenous nations all over the world. Today many coalitions have organized to oppose the wall and the inhumane United States immigration policies.

Q: What kinds of support do you and the *O'odham Against the Wall* organization need to help stop the building of the fence? How can people from around the country best help out your organization?

A: Today our organization would appreciate a website— a site managed by us where we can continue to share information. The website can have a place to have direct access to official governmental addresses for letter writing and direct support to oppose the wall. We as a grassroots organization still seek funds to build a website, fund our quarterly newsletter and print our brochures and other informational flyers. We also seek funding for travel expenses to attend meetings such as the United Nations Permanent Forum and other important workshops and conferences to build our knowledge and to build support.

ⁱ October 1994, "Operation Gatekeeper" was implemented in the San Diego sector. Eventually, "Gatekeeper" was extended eastward all the way to Yuma, Arizona.

1995, "Operation Safeguard" was implemented in central Arizona and was qualitatively boosted in 1999 after more and more migrants, who were no longer crossing through California, increasingly began crossing through Arizona's isolated deserts and mountains.

"Operation Río Grande" was launched in the southernmost region of the Texas border, Rio Grande Valley, where beginning in 2001 increased road building, reinforced steel fences, military surveillance equipment, and the installing thousands of stadium, high illumination lighting reached a new crescendo.

The casualties of this border war have been migrants, who have been criminalized and stripped of their rights. Immigration has been equated with terrorism, environmental degradation, sprawl, deterioration of education and services. The result has been growing human rights and civil rights violations of immigrants in border and non-border areas.

- National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights -July 2003