

# **US border police attack Native American protest against Arizona border wall**

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**16 October 2020**

On Monday, October 12, approximately thirty Tohono O’odham tribal activists and supporters engaging in traditional ceremonies at the border wall on the US-Mexico border were shot at with rubber bullets and teargas by federal and state police. Twelve protesters were arrested. The agents involved in the assault came from the US Border Patrol and Arizona State Troopers and Department of Public Safety.

Videos of the arrests posted online show officers ordering children and people with health conditions who were observing the ceremony from inside their vehicles, out of their vehicles and then spraying them with tear gas. Children who had been in vehicles were grabbed by the police and separated from their parents. At least one person was shot in the chest with a rubber bullet.

The ceremonies were attended by O’odham people from all O’odham nations (Hia Ced O’odham, Tohono O’odham, and Akimel O’odham) in celebration of Indigenous People’s Day, a holiday established as a counterpoint to Columbus Day to recognize Native American peoples. That they occurred at a border patrol checkpoint on O’odham lands was to protest the border wall and border militarization which have decimated graves and other irreplaceable sites.

The O’odham Anti-Border Collective released a statement about the Indigenous People’s Day action, describing their plan to “peacefully, in prayer and spiritual ceremony, block a border patrol checkpoint on unceded O’odham lands in resistance to the daily violence committed by border patrol against O’odham lands and peoples.”

On Monday afternoon, about 35 people waited outside the Pima County jail in Tucson, singing and showing support for those who were arrested at the ceremony. Later in the afternoon, a member of the Tohono O’odham Nation told supporters that they were expecting the protesters to be released by early evening.

“It’s obscene and offensive to us that local and state governments move to celebrate Indigenous Peoples’ Day while the federal government blows up our sacred sites, steals our kids, militarily occupies our communities, and shoots at Native Americans praying to protect our land and ancestors from desecration. They want to appropriate our cultures, but they don’t want us to practice our religions or protect our lands,” one activist present at the ceremony said in a statement released by the O’odham Anti Border Collective.

On Wednesday, October 14, Representative Raul Grijalva, a Democrat from Arizona, issued a statement regarding the use of excessive force against the activists.

“For months, the O’odham people have pleaded with DHS to protect Quitobaquito Springs and other sacred sites along the border while the Trump Administration has continued to bulldoze their ancestral lands to build his useless vanity wall,” said Grijalva. “Now, law enforcement officials are using tear gas and excessive force against Native Americans exercising their constitutional rights in an abhorrent attempt to silence their voices. Americans are keenly aware of the historical mistreatment of this nation’s Indigenous peoples, and the public will be rightfully incensed by this action. This treatment will not stand.”

Grijalva made no mention, however, of his own party’s assaults against the rights of Native Americans. It was under the Obama administration that the now infamous Dakota Access Pipeline was authorized, against the rights of the Standing Rock tribe in South Dakota. Obama oversaw an operation in which police and federal agents attacked protesters with dogs, water cannons, rubber bullets and concussion grenades, producing scenes which shocked millions around the world.

Obama’s actions set the stage for further confrontation between Native Americans and the federal government, now under the auspices of the Trump administration. This

bipartisan policy helped continue the oppression of the county's indigenous population more broadly, allowing the coronavirus to rampage unimpeded.

Tribal nations have been hit especially hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Tohono O'odham Nation declared a state of emergency on March 13. The Tohono O'odham Nation appears to be the only tribe in Arizona other than the Navajo Nation identifying its COVID-19 cases by age and gender. The Tohono O'odham had 62 known cases and eight confirmed deaths as of May 29, in a tribe of approximately 34,000 people.

Of its 62 cases, 39 were women and 23 were men. The average age of its 62 known cases was 46.5 years old with an age range of 12 to 87. Four of the cases were less than 20 years old, 25 were between 21 and 44 years old, 11 were 45 to 54 years old, 10 were 55 and 64 years old and 12 were 65 years and older.

The Tohono O'odham Nation also noted in its data that 26 people were hospitalized, and 40 cases had serious underlying medical conditions.

The Tohono O'odham Nation is the second largest reservation in the United States by land measurement, with 2.7 million acres. The Nation shares almost 80 miles of its border with Mexico. The O'odham's traditional homelands extend far into Mexico as do many of its tribal members. Approximately 2,000 members live in Sonora and use a Tribal ID which serves as a passport to come and go across the border. Tribal members have been routinely harassed, abused and assaulted by the Border Patrol for many years.

The Tohono O'odham have a complicated relationship with the United States government and its southern border that goes much deeper than tensions with the Border Patrol. The Nation issued a legislative Resolution in February 2017 declaring that since the United States created a border with Mexico in 1854, the Nation's members have experienced direct negative effects, including damage to the Nation's cultural resources, illegal dumping, and environmental degradation. The Resolution declares that the Nation opposes the construction of a wall on its southern boundary with Mexico, but it does not oppose vehicle barriers in certain areas.

The Nation's government has a history of working on a government-to-government basis with the United States on border issues, but never waived its sovereign rights including the right to travel freely across the Mexican border. Tribal members have traveled across their lands and the modern-day border for generations. Questions

over security and immigration have created new difficulties for the tribe, and Trump's border wall has exacerbated those tensions.

Last year, Tohono O'odham leaders from Mexico raised criticisms of the tribal council, calling for greater support for the rights of members living in Mexico and a stronger stance against the wall. When US diplomats first mapped the border, they considered the area uninhabitable and paid little attention to the people already living there.

But interest in the indigenous people has increased on the border as the US has tightened its immigration policies and its border controls. In the 1990s, the US increased law enforcement in urban border areas under the Democratic Clinton administration. Smugglers shifted their attention to the less-monitored tribal lands. In the mid-2000s, to curb drug smugglers, the tribal council approved a resolution to seek federal funding to build a vehicle barrier that would still allow wildlife and people to pass through.

The measure drew vehement opposition from some tribal members angry over any policy that would dig up sacred earth and serve as a barrier between their ancestral lands.

After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, then-President George W. Bush signed the 2006 Secure Fence Act, calling for 700 miles of fencing. On Tohono O'odham land, barbed-wire fencing was replaced by a line of thick metal posts.

Verlon Jose, former Tribal Chairman, told the *USA Today*, "I would say this is not only a Tohono O'odham issue, this is not only an international issue between Mexico and the U.S., this is a world issue. The Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall and many other walls that were built out there to corral human beings—I believe, at this time, the people are going to say that we are going to accept no more of those things."



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