

Tribe turns hostile toward migrants

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TOHONO O'ODHAM INDIAN RESERVATION, Ariz. - This remote stretch of desert used to be friendly territory for Mexicans who had skipped the border and were hiking north to reach families and jobs in the United States.

Sympathetic members of the Tohono O'Odham Nation -- whose name means "desert people" -- had lived on this, the harshest part of the West Desert, for generations and knew how unyielding the landscape could be. A historically impoverished community with unemployment rates nearing 50 percent, they understood the poverty the Mexicans were trying to escape.

They offered water, food and shelter, directions to the nearest towns, occasionally even a ride.

There weren't enough Mexicans crossing over to make a difference. A hundred in a month, tops, hiking through a territory about the size of Connecticut.

"You'd ask, 'Where you going?' and they might say, 'Tucson,' " Tohono O'odham police Sgt. David Cray recalled. "So you'd say, 'Well, jump in the back of the truck, I'll take you as far as Sells [Ariz.]."

"That's how uncommon it was."

But times have changed for the 20,000 or so tribal members who live on the 2.8 million-acre reservation west of Tucson, Ariz., -- the second-largest reservation in the United States.

A decade-old squeeze by the U.S. Border Patrol on the most popular crossing points along the U.S.-Mexico border has funneled illegal crossers into the most remote areas of the border -- and especially onto the Tohono O'odham Reservation.

The trickle of migrants trekking across Tohono country has turned into some 1,500 a day, tribal officials say, as crossers head toward the reservation to avoid checkpoints in Douglas, Ariz., and other nearby crossing points.

The increase has bred resentment among the Tohono tribe members against the migrants -- and against the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which tribal leaders say should be doing more to staunch the flow of illegal crossers.

The influx has also resulted in disproportionately high numbers of migrant deaths on the reservation. Crossers perish in 120-degree heat or piercing winter cold.

From October 2002 to October 2003, the U.S. Border Patrol recorded 340 migrant deaths along the U.S.-Mexico border. Nearly 200 of those were along the Arizona-Mexico border.

Of those deaths, 87 occurred on the reservation, which runs along 76 miles of Arizona's border with the Mexican state of Sonora. Border Patrol agents rescued some 400 more from death on the reservation during the same year, officials said.

"That by far is the deadliest place along the Mexican-American border to cross into the United States," said Agent Andy Adame, public information officer for the Border Patrol's Tucson Sector.

Facing legions of desperate strangers -- walking day and night through their back yards, dying under patches of prickly pear and showing up near death in the tribe's emergency rooms -- the tribe's attitude toward helping the immigrants has changed.

The migrants are no longer viewed as benign passersby. They are regarded as a menace -- to homes, to personal safety, to tribal healthcare and law enforcement.

"Our parents and grandparents gave them food, shelter," said Gloria Chavez, who lives in the village of San Miguel, which has the highest concentration of migrant deaths on the reservation. "But nowadays we never know who they are. Every one of them is a threat."

Tribal elders say that while they still sympathize with the plight of the migrants, their sheer numbers have forced the tribe to defend their homes and land.

The tribal council has denied requests by local aid groups to put water jugs out for the migrants and banned their own people from putting the jugs out, saying they don't want to encourage migrants to walk through the reservation. Tribal police detain bands of migrants to turn over to Border Patrol agents, while readily admitting that they have no authority to enforce immigration laws.

"Our first priority is to protect the Tohono O'odham Nation," said Police Chief Richard Saunders. "The last thing we want them to do is give up on us and take this as a way of life."

Humanitarian groups call the tribe's practices selfish and cruel, saying that the migrants aren't there to commit crimes but to find decent jobs in the United States so they might support their families in Mexico.

Robin Hoover, who founded the Tucson-based group Humane Borders, has led the charge to put water in the desert for migrants and said the Tohono council's decision to ban the water jugs went too far.

"In our judgment, no political status, no legal posture, no moral tradition and no social ethic can absolve the Tohono O'odham Nation for not proactively providing water or allowing others to help," Hoover said in an opinion piece distributed to the local media earlier this year.

Hoover is angry at the Tohono tribe for its attitude toward the migrants -- but blames the U.S. government for enforcing a border-control policy that has pushed migrants into the deadliest place in the desert.

"It is immoral to use the desert as part of the deterrent," said Hoover, a Big Springs native and graduate of Texas Christian University.

It may be the only thing that Hoover and the Tohono agree upon.

The Tohono O'odham elders want an immigration accord with Mexico that would eliminate the need to cross illegally. They have asked Congress for reinforcements along the reservation's border, which is marked by a flimsy barbed-wire fence.

Border Patrol agents say they are doing the best they can with the resources they've got. "We've got a very good working relationship with them down there," Adame said. "We are addressing these issues, speaking to tribal members directly in an attempt to work with them to find a solution to these issues."

Meanwhile, the signs of the Tohono O'odham's anxiety are everywhere.

Residents lock their doors and stay out of the streets, saying they no longer feel safe sleeping outdoors at night -- like they used to when 120-degree temperatures forced them out of their sweltering homes.

Official tribal visual presentations are dotted with ominous numbers showing the damage the migrants are doing to the land:

- 4,500 abandoned cars processed by local police and towed away.
- 60 percent of police resources spent on investigating crimes, injuries and deaths of migrants.
- \$3 million in local funding spent on migrant healthcare and law enforcement.
- 70,000 pounds of narcotics confiscated from smugglers or abandoned in burlap backpacks in the past year.
- Eight pounds of trash per immigrant -- water jugs, diapers, worn-out clothes -- left on the ground.

Tohono families tell of making sandwiches for large groups of migrants and then calling the U.S. Border Patrol to come and pick them up.

They also tell of intruders breaking into homes looking for food, carjackers assaulting residents for their trucks, and smugglers luring tribal members into crime. The niece of a tribal official was recently arrested and accused of driving undocumented Mexican citizens across the reservation.

"Historically, the Tohono O'odham have been compassionate to their plight," said Ned Norris Jr., vice chairman of the Tohono O'odham Nation. "But people's homes are being violated, their rights are being violated, their personal property damaged. . . . Now, we have to revisit how compassionate we want to be."

On the border, rancher and tribe member Oliver Smith sees evidence of illegal crossers "all the time."

Piles of trash, horses carting bags of marijuana, snipped fences that let his cattle wander into Mexico. Several times a day, he'll see the people themselves, humping backpacks across the harsh terrain.

Local law-enforcement officials refer to Smith's plot of land as "the danger zone." Smith refuses to move from the ranch where he was raised.

"When I see them, I start shooting," he said. "Not at them, just up in the air, so they know they're not welcome."

