

Reservation fights woes of trafficking

The Tohono O'odham tribe in Arizona has seen its desert land fall under the corrupting influence of smugglers

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ON THE TOHONO O'ODHAM INDIAN RESERVATION, Ariz. -- A smuggler's paradise has taken root amid the desert cactuses and mountains of the largest Indian spread on the U.S.-Mexico border, an entryway as big as Connecticut for 1,500 undocumented migrant workers and drug traffickers who pass through here daily.

Faced with such unrelenting traffic, the tribe that has lived in the Sonoran Desert for millenniums says it has had enough.

Under newly elected tribal leadership, the Tohono O'odham have stepped up a campaign urging the federal government to improve border security and alleviate the tribe's increasing costs to police the boundary and provide emergency care to migrants found nearly dead of thirst.

But it wasn't until this month that the tribe's new vice chairman, Ned Norris Jr., realized how the seeming lawlessness on the border had reached new lows, perniciously corrupting his people.

Even his niece, he learned, took a smuggler's payoff of thousands of dollars to transport illegal immigrants from the reservation to a drop-off location elsewhere in Arizona--an ominous sign of how illegal trafficking has matured into a big business, he said.

The lure of easy money

"One of my niece's vehicles was confiscated by Border Patrol because she was hauling immigrants," Norris said. "When you got an economic situation out there, when somebody is flashing \$15,000 in front of your face, more than you have seen in your life at one time, and all I need to do is take someone from this point to that point, yeah, [you're going to do it]."

With about half the tribe's 18,000 members unemployed, the corrupting influence of money offered by smugglers is a problem, he said.

That's not the only financial issue facing the tribe.

The Indian nation spends about \$2.5 million a year to pay its 71-officer police department to patrol the border, joining the Border Patrol and an elite customs unit made up of Native American trackers called the Shadow Wolves.

In addition, the Tohono O'odham, the native term for Desert People, have about \$500,000 a year diverted from a federally funded reservation hospital to pay for emergency care for migrants found stricken in the mountains or desert.

Last year, the hot, arid terrain claimed the lives of 85 illegal migrants; officials say that is a record number. The tribal police have doubled their drug seizures in the past three years, confiscating 65,000 pounds last year, mostly marijuana hauled by young men with backpacks.

The tribe is able to cover the police expenses with revenue from casino gaming and other sources.

The new leaders blame the federal government and changes in border security for forcing smugglers of drugs and immigrants to use inhospitable backcountry such as the Tohono O'odham 75-mile borderland, marked only by a cattle fence.

Several years ago, most of the illegal crossings occurred in and near big border cities like San Diego, until those urban centers won tougher border enforcement measures from Washington.

Complicating the issue is the tribe's sovereignty as a Native American nation, which has left it out of the loop in routine congressional and White House negotiations on border issues, said tribal chairwoman Vivian Juan-Saunders, whose husband, Richard, is the police chief.

That was evident again as recently as Wednesday, when federal officials announced a proposed \$1 billion in Medicare funds over the next four years for Arizona hospitals caring for uninsured immigrants. None of those funds would go to the reservation hospital, which Juan-Saunders found insulting.

"It's a lack of respect for the Tohono O'odham nation," she said. "We're continually left out of major policy decisions and laws. It's very frustrating."

She said the tribe's name is pronounced "tho-no o-than."

Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.), whose district includes the reservation, agreed that Washington should reimburse the tribe, but such initiatives have faced difficulty in Congress.

"We have too many layers to go through," Grijalva said. "Not all tribes are having to deal with this [border-related expense], but this particular tribe, the Tohono O'odham, are."

Mood shifts on reservation

On the reservation, established in 1916, many residents relate how they have been awakened at night by smugglers ransacking their homes, looking for a new lair or a place to sleep. Decades ago, only a few illegal migrants dared pass through the Sonoran Desert to enter the United States, and tribe members had generously offered food and shelter.

Now that has changed.

Standing on the border at the remote San Miguel Gate, a crossing point that is nothing more than a cattle gate, tribe member Allen Throssell, 64, said he could remember how a passerby was a rarity in the 1940s and '50s.

Throssell, a rancher and retired ironworker, has lived on the 2.8 million-acre reservation his entire life and now resides in a house 4 miles north of the gate. On the other side of the gate, the tribal land continues into Mexico.

In the 1980s, the tribe changed its name from Papago, which means "bean eaters" and was originally given to the tribe by Spanish colonialists.

Today, a drifter passes by Throssell's home almost every night. He has studied how dogs

bark more aggressively when such strangers, possibly smugglers or migrants, approach his home. Out of concern for his safety, he no longer rises early in the morning to work on his pickup truck, which has rotting floorboards in its bed.

"Everything has changed, and there is a lot of lawlessness," he said.

"You're just more careful. You're more cautious. You're more observant. It's to the point where it's a real concern to everybody."