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The Daily Texan

U.S. defends border fence construction

UT group testifies at first U.S. defense on international stage

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Published: Thursday, October 23, 2008

Updated: Thursday, October 23, 2008



For the first time in an international forum, the U.S. government defended its decision to construct a border wall between Texas and Mexico.

The University of Texas Working Group on Human Rights and the Border Wall testified Wednesday at a general hearing before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights that the wall violates human rights. A policy official from the Department of Homeland Security represented the U.S.

The commission, composed of seven independent jurists, is one of two bodies of the inter-governmental Organization of American States responsible for monitoring human rights in the Americas.

The human rights group is composed of faculty and students from UT-Austin and UT-Brownsville who work with the Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice at the UT law school. Denise Gilman, a clinical professor at the law school, attended the hearing.

"I feel the meeting went well in terms that we presented our position to the commission," Gilman said. "Hopefully, this put some pressure on the U.S. government [to stop border wall construction]."

Group members at the meeting said U.S. representatives seemed unprepared.

"The U.S. could not provide any specific answers to questions raised by the commission," said Ariel Dulitzky, a UT professor and associate director of the Rapoport Center. "They defended construction of the border wall as a national security issue in response to the 9/11 attacks."

The commission noted that ensuring the nation's safety is not sufficient reasoning to violate human rights, Dulitzky said.

According to the human rights group's report, the border wall violates the United States' obligations under the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. Group members said the wall disregards the rights of indigenous communities and the right to property and equal protection. The wall also severely degrades the environment, according to the report.

"It is an international issue," Gilman said. "There are limits on the types of issues we can raise in U.S. courts, so we believed we could go deeper into the issues on an international level."

Land owners in South Texas who were opposed to the construction of the wall expressed concern, and the rights group was then organized. Members said construction is disproportionately affecting poor Latino families. In some areas, the border wall splits residents' property in half or restricts access to the Rio Grande River, which the families use for irrigation and water for cattle.

Statistical evidence shows that the border wall does not run through properties owned by white, wealthy land owners, Gilman and Dulitzky said.

Part of the testimony was dedicated to Margo Tamez, whose family owns property directly affected by the wall.





Tamez's family uses parts of its land for spiritual purposes, and access would be restricted by the border fence, according to the group's report. Tamez's family uses water from the river to irrigate their crops, but border wall construction would make this no longer possible, Tamez said.

"This has been incredibly painful and hurtful in many ways," Tamez said. "The idea of the wall was a huge message from the U.S. that we are sacrificeable, that we are a non-status group."

Gilman said the group was attempting to urge the commission to recommend that the U.S. halt construction of the border wall because of human rights violations. The commission will not publish decisions until November.

Comments

1 comments

Alex

Wed Dec 17 2008 21:23

I think there are more simple ways of dealing with this. I think both sides have a bigger agenda than what they are expressing. Both sides have legitimate points but I'm sure one is more of a concern the other to address. There's already a wall there, reinforcing it doesn't change anything, my opinion is build away to protect us. Build around properties, and allow water access with pipes and pumps. The whole idea is that no one is to cross the border unless permitted. That's what borders are for.

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