

# Destroying Indigenous Populations

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The Fort Laramie Treaty once guaranteed the Sioux Nation the right to a large area of their original land, which spanned several states and included their sacred Black Hills, where they were to have “the absolute and undisturbed use and occupation” of the land.

However, when gold was discovered in the Black Hills, President Ulysses S. Grant told the army to look the other way in order to allow gold miners to enter the territory. After repeated violations of the exclusive rights to the land by gold prospectors and by migrant workers crossing the reservation borders, the US government seized the Black Hills land in 1877.

Charmaine White Face, an Oglala Tetuwan who lives on the Pine Ridge Reservation, is the spokesperson for the Teton Sioux Nation Treaty Council (TSNTC), established in 1893 to uphold the terms of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. She is also coordinator of the voluntary group, [Defenders of the Black Hills](#), that works to preserve and protect the environment where they live.

“We call gold the metal which makes men crazy,” White Face told Truthout while in New York to attend the annual Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at the United Nations in late May. “Knowing they could not conquer us like they wanted to ... because when you are fighting for your life, or the life of your family, you will do anything you can ... or fighting for someplace sacred like the Black Hills you will do whatever you can ... so they had to put us in prisoner of war camps. I come from POW camp 344, the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. We want our treaties upheld, [we want our land back](#).”

Most of the Sioux’s land has been taken, and what remains has been laid waste by radioactive pollution.

“Nothing grows in these areas – nothing can grow. They are too radioactive,” White Face said.

Although the Black Hills and adjoining areas are sacred to the indigenous peoples and nations of the region, their attempts at reclamation are not based on religious claims but on the provisions of the Constitution. The occupation of indigenous land by the US government is in direct violation of its own law, according to White Face.

She references Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution: “This Constitution, and the Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof; and all Treaties made, or which shall be made, under the Authority of the United States, shall be the supreme Law of the Land; and the Judges in every State shall be bound thereby, any Thing in the Constitution or Laws of any State to the Contrary notwithstanding.”

The spokesperson for the TSNTC declares, "We need our treaty upheld. We want it back. Without it we are disappearing. They might have made us into brown Americans who speak the English language and eat a different kind of food, and are not able to live with the buffalo like we are supposed to, but that is like a lion in a cage. You can feed it and it will reproduce, but it is only a real lion when it gets its freedom and can be who it's supposed to be. That's how we are. We are like that lion in a cage. We are not free right now. We need to be able to govern ourselves the way we did before."

Delegations from the TSNTC began their efforts in the United Nations in 1984 after exhausting all strategies for solution within the United States.

## **Homeland Contamination**

There is uranium all around the Black Hills, South and North Dakota, Wyoming and Montana. Mining companies came in and dug large holes through these lands to extract uranium in the 1950's and 1960's prior to any prohibitive regulations. Abandoned uranium mines in southwestern South Dakota number 142. In the Cave Hills area, another sacred place in South Dakota used for vision quests and burial sites, there are 89 abandoned uranium mines.

In an essay called "Native North America: The Political Economy of Radioactive Colonialism," political activists Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke state that former US President Richard Nixon declared the 1868 Treaty Territory a "National Sacrifice Area," implying that the territory, and its people, were being sacrificed to uranium and nuclear radiation.

The worst part, according to White Face, is that, "None of these abandoned mines have been marked. They never filled them up, they never capped them. There are no warning signs ... nothing. The Forest Service even advertises the Picnic Springs Campground as a tourist place. It's about a mile away from the Cave Hills uranium mines."

The region is honeycombed with exploratory wells that have been dug as far down as six to eight hundred feet. In the southwestern Black Hills area, there are more than 4,000 uranium exploratory wells. On the Wyoming side of the Black Hills, there are 3,000 wells. Further north into North Dakota, there are more than a thousand wells.

The Black Hills and its surroundings are the recharge area for several major aquifers in the South Dakota, Nebraska, and Wyoming regions. The crisis can be gauged from the simple description that White Face gives: "When the winds come, they pick up the [uranium] dust and carry it; when it rains or snows, it washes it down into the aquifers and groundwater. Much of this radioactive contamination then finds its way into the Missouri River."

She informs us that twelve residents out of about 600 of the sparsely populated county of Cave Hills have developed brain tumors. A nuclear physicist has declared one mine in the area to be as radioactively "hot" as ground zero of Hiroshima.

Red Shirt, a village along the Cheyenne River on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, has had its [water tested high for radiation](#) and local animals have died after consuming fish from the river.

After three daughters of a family and their mother died of cancer, a family requested White Face to have the municipal water tested. The radiation levels were found to be equal to

those inside an x-ray machine. Little wonder then that the surviving sons and their father are afflicted with the disease. People procuring their grain and cattle from the region are advised to be extra cautious.

One cannot but feel the desperation of her people when White Face bemoans, "It's pure genocide for us. We are all dying from cancer. We are trying not to become extinct, not to let the Great Sioux Nation become extinct."

The Ogala Sioux are engaged in ongoing legal battles with the [pro-uranium](#) state of South Dakota. They are aware of the unequal nature of their battle, but they cannot afford to give up. White Face explains how "... Our last court case was lost before learning that the judge was a former lawyer for one of the mining companies. Also, the governor's sister and brother-in-law work for mining companies [[Powertech](#)] and a professor, hired by the Forest Service to test water run-off for contamination, is on contract with a company that works for the mining company. When I found out the judge was a lawyer for the mining company I knew we would lose, but we went ahead with the case for the publicity, because we have to keep waking people up."

Other tribes, such as the Navajo and Hopi in New Mexico, [have been exposed to radioactive material](#) as well. Furthermore, the July 16, 1979, spill of 100 million gallons of radioactive water containing uranium tailings from a tailing pond into the north arm of the Rio Puerco, near the small town of Church Rock, New Mexico, also [affected indigenous peoples in Arizona](#).

Her rage and grief are evident as White Face laments, "When we have our prayer gatherings we ask that no young people come to attend. If you want to have children don't come to Cave Hills because it's too radioactive."

The exploitative approach to the planet's resources and peoples that led to these environmental and health disasters collides with White Face's values: "I always say that you have to learn to live with the earth, and not in domination of the earth."

## **Nuking the Colonies**

The US government practices another approach. In occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, the uranium that has caused genocide of sorts at home has proceeded to wreak new havoc.

Two Iraqi NGO's, the Monitoring Net of Human Rights in Iraq (MHRI) and the Conservation Center of Environment and Reserves in Fallujah (CCERF) have extensively documented the effects of restricted weapons, such as depleted uranium (DU) munitions, against the people of Fallujah during two massive US military assaults on the city in 2004.

In March 2008, the NGO's were to present a report titled "Prohibited Weapons Crisis: The effects of pollution on the public health in Fallujah" to the [7th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council](#).

Muhammad al-Darraji, director, MHRI and president, CCERF, was to present the report with an appeal, "We are kindly asking the High Commissioner for Human Rights to look at the content of the report in accordance with the General Assembly's resolution 48/ 141 (paragraph 4) of 20 December 1993, to investigate the serious threat (to the) health right in Fallujah and Iraq, and to relay the results of this investigation to the Commission on Human

Rights to take the suitable decisions.”

Attached to the aforementioned is another report co-authored by Dr. Najim Askouri, a nuclear physicist trained in Britain and a leading Iraqi nuclear researcher and Dr. Assad al-Janabi, director of the Pathology Department at the 400-bed public hospital in Najaf. Their report includes a section on the “Depleted Uranium Crisis” from Najaf, 180 miles from where DU was used in the First Gulf War.

Dr. Najim begins the report by noting that Coalition Forces, mostly US, used 350 tons of DU weapons in about 45 days in 1991, primarily in the stretch of Iraq northwest of Kuwait where Iraqi troops were on their retreat. Then, in 2003, during the Shock and Awe bombing of Baghdad, the US used another 150 tons of DU. He says that cancer is spreading from the conflict area as a health epidemic and will only get worse. The cancer rate has more than tripled over the last 16 years in Najaf.

According to Dr. Najim, “When DU hits a target, it aerosolizes and oxidizes, forming a uranium oxide that is two parts UO<sub>3</sub> and one part UO<sub>2</sub>. The first is water soluble and filters down into the water aquifers and also becomes part of the food chain as plants take up the UO<sub>3</sub> dissolved in water. The UO<sub>2</sub> is insoluble and settles as dust on the surface of the earth and is blown by the winds to other locations. As aerosolized dust, it can enter the lungs and begin to cause problems as it can cross cell walls and even impact the genetic system.”

One of Dr. Najim’s grandsons was born with congenital heart problems, Down Syndrome, an underdeveloped liver and leukemia. He believes that the problems are related to the child’s parents having been exposed to DU.

Detailing a skyrocketing rate of cancer and other pollution-related illnesses among the population of Fallujah since the two sieges, the report states, “Starting in 2004 when the political situation and devastation of the health care infrastructure were at their worst, there were 251 reported cases of cancer. By 2006, when the numbers more accurately reflected the real situation, that figure had risen to 688. Already in 2007, 801 cancer cases have been reported. Those figures portray an incidence rate of 28.21 [per 100,000] by 2006, even after screening out cases that came into the Najaf Hospital from outside the governorate, a number which contrasts with the normal rate of 8-12 cases of cancer per 100,000 people.

“Two observations are striking. One, there has been a dramatic increase in the cancers that are related to radiation exposure, especially the very rare soft tissue sarcoma and leukemia. Two, the age at which cancer begins in an individual has been dropping rapidly, with incidents of breast cancer at 16 (years of age), colon cancer at 8 (years of age), and liposarcoma at 1.5 years (of age).” Dr. Assad noted that 6 percent of the cancers reported occurred in the 11-20 age range and another 18 percent in ages 21-30.

“The importance of this information confirms there is a big disaster in this city.... The main civilian victims of most illnesses were the children, and the rate of them represents 72 percent of total illness cases of 2006, most of them between the ages of 1 month and 12 years.... Many new types and terrible amounts of illnesses started to appear [from] 2006 until now, such as Congenital Spinal cord abnormalities, Congenital Renal abnormalities, Septicemia, Meningitis, Thalassemia, as well as a significant number of undiagnosed cases at different ages. The speed of the appearance these signals of pollution after one year of military operations refers to the use of a great amount of prohibited weapons used in 2004 battles. The continued pollution maybe will lead to a genetic drift, starting to appear with

many abnormalities in children, because the problems were related to exposure of the child's parents to pollution sources and this may lead to more new abnormalities in the future. According to the security situation with many checkpoints and irregular cards to allow the civilians to enter or exit the city until now, all this helps to continue the terrible situation for this time. Therefore, we think that all these data is only 50 percent of the real numbers of illnesses."

The Sioux tell their youth to avoid their radioactive native lands if they wish to procreate and prosper. Those in Iraq have no option but to lead maimed lives in their native land.

On February 4, 2009, Muhammad al-Darraji sent President Barack Obama a letter, along with the aforementioned report. A few excerpts are presented here:

"We have the honor to submit with this letter our report on the effects on public health of prohibited weapons used by the United States during its military operations in Fallujah (March-November 2004). It was our intention to present the report to the Human Rights Council of the United Nations on 4 March 2008, but both security and political reasons played a significant role in making this task impossible. The report, now in your hands, contains vast evidence and documentation on the catastrophic and continuous pollution in Iraq (to prevent) which nobody has taken any real action to help the victims or clean up polluted places. Some months ago, and in June 2008, I sent this report directly to some US congressmen. Two of them went to my town, Fallujah, and visited the general hospital to investigate the claims contained in our report. No substantial result came out of this visit. In February 2009 one of my colleagues, who worked in the hospital's statistical office and helped gather information about the pollution, was killed by unknown individuals. The blood of my friend is the driving force that led me to write to you directly in order for you to release the facts for which my friend paid with his life. Therefore, we are kindly asking you to look at the content of the attached report and to investigate the serious threats to the right to life of the inhabitants of Fallujah and other polluted places in Iraq, as well as to publicly release the results of this investigation under right of information about what really happened in Iraq."

The president has yet to respond.

*Jason Coppola and Bhaswati Sengupta contributed to this article.*

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