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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Tribal Chairwoman Charlene Nijmeh condemns Secretary Deb Haaland's response to violent National Parks Police attack on her delegation while enroute to meet with the Bureau of Indian Affairs

WASHINGTON, DC – In a powerful letter addressed to Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, Tribal Chairwoman Charlene Nijmeh of the Bay Area's Muwekma Ohlone Tribe has called for accountability following violent police actions against her people by the Department of the Interior. The letter, dated October 20, 2024, criticizes the violent assault on her people by the National Parks Police on October 15th and 16th, where tribal members were subjected to “unnecessary, unprovoked, and unjustified police actions,” the Chairwoman writes.

Chairwoman Nijmeh detailed in her letter that these assaults highlight a continued colonial attitude within the Department of the Interior and raise significant concerns regarding the federal government's continued mistreatment of Native Americans. “The events of October 15th and 16th were yet another horrible stain on America's relationship with indigenous people,” she wrote, underscoring the distress caused by the police violence that left women and children bruised and traumatized.

The letter denounces a mischaracterization of the incident by Secretary Haaland's Chief of Staff and questions the immediacy with which the Secretary aligned with law enforcement narratives without reviewing the full scope of evidence. Chairwoman Nijmeh implores the Secretary to reconsider her positions, stating that the violence that transpired was precipitated by unwarranted threats towards the tribe's horses—sacred symbols of the allyship between the Muwekma Ohlone and Oglala Lakota peoples.

“This sacred line of horses was provided to us by the Oglala Lakota” says Nijmeh, “so that they would carry us from across Turtle Island to Washington, DC on our three-month long journey across Turtle Island to demand justice from Congress and the Administration.”

Chairwoman Nijmeh challenged the notion—articulated in communications from the Secretary's office—that her Tribe's only path towards gaining federal recognition is through congressional avenues. Chairwoman Nijmeh forcefully argues in a legal analysis that the Department has misconstrued relevant statutes and regulations, and that a proper reading clearly demonstrates the Department is fully able to corrective administrative errors.

What the Muwekma Ohlone Are Seeking

“The dispossession of Ohlone land is not unique to our tribe,” says Nijmeh. “Our people have traveled across the U.S. to seek justice; to seek the return of our tribe's federal recognition, which was taken away illegally,” says Nijmeh. The Muwekma Ohlone Tribe was previously federally recognized as the Verona Band of Alameda County, and that recognition was never terminated by an act of Congress, and a federal

district court judge in the Northern District of California affirmed that the Tribe has retained its sovereign immunity despite not being on the BIA's list of officially recognized Tribes.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs erred when it wrongly omitted the Tribe from the official list of recognized Tribes when that list was first drafted in 1978. The Tribe has struggled for more than 45-years to affirm its federal status, petitioning the Congress for legislative recognition and petitioning the Administration for corrective action. "They reported that many of the Ohlone tribes did not need land and therefore did not need federal recognition, and they were wrong on both fronts," says Nijmeh.

"The unwillingness to come to the defense of our people in our time of need will forever haunt your political career," Chairwoman Nijmeh declared, advocating for recognition of sovereign rights and the respectful treatment of Indigenous peoples.

As a response to these incidents, the tribe will be pursuing transparency through a Freedom of Information Act request for internal communications relating to these events, advocating for accountability at every level of government interaction.

Many members of the Tribe suspect that Secretary Haaland's office was well aware of the Tribe's presence on the National Mall and deliberately ordered the violence against them.

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For additional quotes, interviews, pictures, video footage, or other information, please contact Matt Ricchiazzi via email at matt@muwekma.org, or via phone at 716-548-3371.

About the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe

The [Muwekma Ohlone Tribe](#) is at the National Mall in Washington D.C. through the coming election, on their [Trail of Truth](#), to advocate for the return of the tribe's federal recognition, which would give them the ability to operate as other federally recognized tribes do and protect their histories, cultures, and lifeways as a legal entity.

The Muwekma Ohlone Tribe was previously federally recognized as the Verona Band of Alameda County, was never terminated by an act of Congress, and a federal district court judge in the Northern District of California affirmed that the Tribe has retained its sovereign immunity despite not being on the BIA's list of officially recognized Tribes.

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