Tahitian parliamentary report: France covered up nuclear test fallout

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A decade after France conducted its last nuclear explosions in its South Pacific colony of French Polynesia, the controversy over the damage to local people's health is continuing to reverberate. According to a report presented to the French Polynesia Assembly on February 9, French governments covered up for 40 years the fact that the main populated island of Tahiti was subjected to repeated fallout from atmospheric nuclear tests between 1966 and 1974.

Released after a six-month investigation, the 478-page report concluded that the French state suppressed "damning proof" that radioactive fallout occurred on Tahiti after each of the 41 atmospheric tests conducted at the Tuamotu atolls of Moruroa and Fangataufa—1,200 kilometers southeast of the capital Papeete. France also conducted 140 underground nuclear explosions at the same sites between 1975 and 1991, and from June 1995 to May 1996.

Led by the *Moruroa e Tatou* (*Moruroa and Us*) association, former test-site workers are demanding compensation for serious medical conditions caused by their involvement in the program. In order to appeal to growing anti-French sentiment among indigenous Polynesians, pro-independence President Oscar Temaru promised to make the issue of compensation a priority, as part of his successful 2005 election campaign.

The Assembly unanimously accepted the report, voting in the absence of 21 members of the pro-French opposition party led by former president Gaston Flosse. Flosse, a longtime Gaullist ally of current French President Jacques Chirac, backed the testing program during the 20 years he held office as Polynesian president up to 2004. Flosse lost a legal challenge to the establishment of the inquiry committee and his party's representatives boycotted all its meetings.

The authorities in Paris did everything possible to frustrate the Tahitian inquiry into the French nuclear testing. Officials refused permission for the committee to visit the nuclear atolls, maintaining a ban on any outside investigations of the sites that has been rigorously enforced since 1966. The French Defence Ministry and military are still in charge of the two atolls.

The committee was also denied access to critical French government documents classified as defence secrets. Officials refused requests for information and declined to participate in any discussions. After the committee visited Tureia and Mangareva, the French Defence Ministry sent a delegation to pressure the local municipalities to destroy potentially compromising traces, such as old protective buildings, remaining from the test period. As a result, the inquiry was forced to base much of its report on research by the Observatory of French Nuclear Weapons (CDRPC) and the non-government Commission of Independent Research and Information on Radioactivity (CRIIRAD).

According to the report, the evidence that was uncovered—including some 25 previously secret Defence Ministry documents—showed "incontestable and precise" proof of lying by the testing authorities, who maintained the tests were "clean" and that radioactive fallout did not affect the population. After questioning government ministers, medical experts and health workers, the committee concluded that high rates of thyroid cancer among Polynesian women and the onset of acute myeloid leukemia could be linked to radioactive fallout.

The report challenges the effectiveness of the meteorological system put in place at the time by the Centre of Nuclear Experimentation, on which much of the French data was based. There were only 14 weather stations covering a territory of 5 million square

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kilometres—an area equivalent to continental Europe. The report states that this number was patently insufficient, and incapable of foretelling the risks of fallout.

Significant environmental and public health consequences began with the very first atmospheric test on July 2, 1966. Following that test, according to evidence given by CRIIRAD, external exposure to radioactive fallout in the Gambier Islands was twice the official levels later published. Scientists said the radioactivity level was 1,700 times greater than the maximum recorded by sensors at the Bugey Nuclear Centre in France following the passage of the radioactive cloud from the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion in May 1986.

At a press conference held to coincide with the release of the report, *Moruroa and Us* president Roland Oldham said the French Cancer Society was reporting more than 600 cases of cancer and 250 related deaths a year in French Polynesia from a total population of 250,000. One recent study indicated that 25.7 out of 100,000 women contracted thyroid cancer, compared to a ratio of 4.8 out of 100,000 women in France. The survey further established that 7.4 percent of former Moruroa workers had physically disabled children, with 2.4 percent having mentally impaired children. In 2003, 84 of the 1,544 original members of *Moruroa and Us* died. Leukemia, which typically manifests itself 15 to 20 years after contact with radiation, is increasingly prevalent.

French Polynesia became the favoured nuclear testing ground after France lost its Algerian sites following the bitter colonial war there. The aggressive nuclear testing program was used to boost France's pretensions as a world power just as the US was conducting atmospheric tests at Bikini atoll. The military became the mainstay of the French Polynesian economy while its troops and infrastructure assumed a major presence in the Pacific.

Over the next 30 years, France strenuously resisted the Polynesian independence movement, in part to maintain its Pacific test sites. In later years it also defied diplomatic protests by Australia and New Zealand, which sought to exploit widespread popular opposition throughout the region to strengthen their own hegemonic claims over the South Pacific.

In 1985, French secret service agents were dispatched to New Zealand to blow up the Greenpeace flagship the "Rainbow Warrior" in Auckland harbour before it embarked on a protest trip to Moruroa. Documents released in 2005 showed that the crime, which resulted in the death of a crew member, was personally authorised by French president Francois Mitterrand.

Faced with continuing international protests, France finally halted nuclear testing on the Tuamotu atolls in 1996. While French courts have since recognised that some military personnel became health victims, the Paris authorities have denied the existence of any radiation risks in order to fend off demands by local people for compensation.

The Tahitian report concludes with the demand that 10 years after the ending of the testing, "disputes between the French State and the Country [French Polynesia] on the consequences of nuclear testing must be settled." On this basis it makes a series of recommendations, many of which are simply appeals to Paris.

The French authorities, however, are unlikely to simply accede to Tahitian requests. French government spokesmen continue to assert that the nuclear tests were conducted in a remote part of the Tuamotu Archipelago and that local people were well protected. In response to the report, the French High Commissioner's Office in Papeete claimed the French government had a "permanent concern" for the civilian populations as well as those working at the testing sites.

In an attempt to defuse the situation, a nuclear safety official was dispatched to Tahiti for a five-day visit. French defence minister Michele Alliot-Marie called for a "dialogue" and invited Tahiti's elected officials to visit the Tuamotu atoll with her in April.

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