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AT LAST!

France recognises her responsibility to the military and civilian victims of her nuclear tests

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The veterans of France's nuclear testing, after years of futile approaches to military authorities and legal tribunals, all systematically dismissed or (if successful) referred to appeal by the ministry, have now won an apparently decisive victory.

For the first time, a Minister of Defense has now recognised a link, in principle, between some deaths and some illnesses (chiefly cancers) suffered by career servicemen, conscripts and civilians who took part in the France's nuclear testing campaigns, and even by the members of the populations exposed to radioactive fallout from some atmospheric tests.

Hervé Morin has now announced a compensation bill. The onus of proof (proof of a causal link between a cancer and exposure to radiation from tests) no longer lies with the victims. In the majority of cases, such medical proof was almost impossible to present, and even an attestation from an eminent oncologist - as presented in the case of Lucien Parfait - was rejected for decades.

The conclusions of official studies on the matter *"were positive",* according to Jacques Chirac during his presidency. The association of Polynesian victims "Moruroa e Tatu" quoted him as saying in September 2002 to the Tahitian press: *"there will be no adverse effects on health, in the short term or the long term,"* and *"there are no effects to be feared on animals or plants." "Besides, it has not been considered useful to conduct radiological and geo-mechanical surveys of the atolls for the sake of radiological protection,"* even though France will still continue her *"monitoring"* of the sites. Similarly, the medical montioring of personnel involved *"did not result in detection of exposure to ionising radiation greater than natural radioactivity produces,"* according to France's then Head of State - admittedly the man responsible for nuclear tests being resumed straight after his election in 1995.

Today the current Minister of Defense recognises that 150,000 people could have been affected by radiation and could ask for reparation.

The victims, however, or the families of deceased victims, will have to assemble a dossier proving that they were present on the test sites - and for this purpose it seems that only some atmospheric tests will count, the only ones the army recognises as contentious.

Officially, France conducted 210 atomic tests. 17 were in the Sahara from 1960 to 1966, including the first four atmospheric tests and one underground one which accidentally became atmospheric ("Beryl"). The other 193 were at the C.E.P (Centre d'Expérimentation du Pacifique) between 1966 à 1996 - 46 atmospheric tests between 1966 and 1974, then 147 underground.

Note, however, that France's first acknowledged atmospheric explosion, "Gerboise Bleue", which took place in the Sahara on 13 February 1960 and prompted a victory telegram from General de Gaulle: *"Hooray for France !",* may have been preceded by one or two undeclared tests in the Sahara in late 1959.

The atmospheric tests were done on pylons, or from planes or balloons, or in barges, and those in Polynesia were spread over a vast region including the Gambier and Tuamotou archipelagoes. The underground tests were in deep boreholes in the belts or under the lagoons of the Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls (*"Moruroa"* is the local spelling and pronunciation, but the French army and administration use *"Mururoa"*).

With 50 acknowledged atmospheric tests (in fact 51) certainly causing radioactive fallout, France has contributed nearly 10 % of the approximate 540 atmospheric tests of all the nuclear powers. In most cases their fallout was

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considered negligible.

It must be understood, however, that radioactive materials which do not fall back to earth at or near the test sites keep circulating in the upper atmosphere for years and eventually fall to earth elsewhere. As for the radioactive materials left underground, they end up contaminating the groundwater or the oceans, and subsequently the food chain. We must note also that there is no minimum threshold for exposure to a dose of radioactivity, below which it is safe. In fact, our entire planet has been contaminated by the military tests of the nuclear powers (in total over 2500 tests) and continues to be contaminated by nuclear weapons programmes and nuclear power generation.

Lucien Parfait is one of the military victims who brought a case to court. He was a conscript at the time of "Gerboise Bleue". He was on the site at In Ekker, 500 metres from "ground zero" on 1 May 1962, when the underground test called "Beryl" malfunctioned, causing a huge cloud of radioactive dust to engulf a large proportion of those present (including the Minister of Research, who later died of leukemia which he blamed on the accident).

Since then, Lucien Parfait was operated on some thirty times. To understand his terrible ordeal, read his testimony, recently reported by France-Soir. For him, or his comrades and their families, no compensation can obliterate the suffering they endured "for France".

What of the civilian populations of Tahiti, and the Gambier and Tuamotu islands? Judging by the minimalist conclusions of the report of Marcel Jurien de la Gravière (Delegate responsible for defense nuclear safety), submitted on 2 October 2006 to the then Minister of Defense, Mme Alliot-Marie,
those Polynesian populations will have huge difficulties gaining recognition for the damage done to their health and their lives. It will be even harder for the Tuaregs of the Sahara.

But the Minister, Hervé Morin, has henceforth made provision for a very limited number of compensation payouts, as is made clear by the size of the total envelope - a laughable sum when compared with the real needs. In the present state of his bill, he is designed to have the last word on any compensation proposed by the future Allocations Commission. In his view, *"a few hundred"* victims might have the right to compensation. The real figure runs to thousands or tens of thousands. Michel Vergès, the president of AVEN (Association des Victimes des Essais Nucléaires), says that his organisation alone includes 800 widows of deceased test veterans.

If this new bill is to honour France's belated "recognition of debt", it will have to be seriously amended by France's MPs. They must make the compensation envelope a great deal heavier - to do so would be mere justice.

ACDN, 24 March 2009

See the Reuters news

Voir la dépêche de l'AFP

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