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Vandalism on the Prairie de la Palu

Saintes mobilizes

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On Wednesday 15 September in Saintes, alerted that day or the day before, three dozen people answered a call from ACDN, the Humanitarian Choir, and the Mouvement de la Paix. They gathered at 6 p.m. on the Prairie de la Palu in front of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Trees to protest against the [acts of vandalism](#) against the plaques commemorating the victims of the bombs of 6 and 9 August 1945.

The Mayor, Jean Rouger, was at that moment in La Rochelle with the parents of a Saintes's school, meeting with the Academic Inspector and trying to save a primary class threatened with closure for lack of one child. He had sent as his representative Catherine Gaillard-Remonet, the city councillor responsible for the Palu site. She expressed the determination of the municipality - which will lodge legal action "against persons unknown" - to quickly efface all traces of this vandalism.

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"God bless America !!!"

Photo ACDN

Temporarily, the defaced plaques, with the slogans already removed, were put back in place during the ceremony, and the next day the city services were to strengthen and seal their bases so that the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Trees will stand out better.

Also unable to attend, several other council members (Martine Tiberj, Margarita Sola, Christian Couillaud, Sylvie Barre, Thierry Leblan...) sent their apologies and messages of support, despite the short notice, since ACDN's letter had only just reached them.

So did Catherine Quéré, the MP for Saintes and Saint Jean d'Angély, who was in parliament in Paris.

Many other expressions of sympathy have come and keep coming, including from abroad.

A notable presence was a former Councillor in the previous Council, Bridgett Brennan, while an opposition councillor who recently resigned, Françoise Bleynie, sent her apologies.

Georges Mounier and two of his companions represented the local *Veterans' Union*. The daily *Sud Ouest* sent a reporter (see the articles by David Briand on September 14 and 16), as did two weeklies of the region, *La Haute Saintonge* and *Le Littoral*.

The French State was represented by an official of what used to be the Renseignements Généraux. Let us hope that the current President of the Republic, in whose hands lie the fate of 64 million French citizens and potentially nearly a billion human beings, will be informed of the speeches made in Saintes... and will learn particularly from something Jean-Marie Matagne recalled: the revelation made by former President Giscard d'Estaing in his memoirs (*Le pouvoir et la vie*, Tome 2) that he had secretly resolved never to use a nuclear first strike, preferring if necessary a military occupation of France to the likelihood of provoking her annihilation. This amounts to a general condemnation of France's so-called "nuclear deterrence" strategy.

Let us hope, then, that President Sarkozy will make the urgent decision to renounce France's "*nuclear deterrence*",

finally realising that "*the nation's life insurance*" (as he was still calling it last July 10) is in reality its death-insurance.

If so, this foolish, unworthy, scandalous act of vandalism, committed in Saintes but very likely not by a local person, will have served some useful purpose.

Whoever it was, we can say that Saintes has reaffirmed its solidarity with the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and its determination to continue the peaceful struggle for a world free of nuclear weapons.

LETTER FROM ACDN TO THE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCILLORS OF SAINTES

Saintes, 14 September 2010

Mesdames et Messieurs,

The police inquiry ordered by the Mayor and the legal action "against persons unknown" which he issued will perhaps make it possible to determine who committed the act of vandalism on the engraved plaques in front of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Trees on the Prairie de la Palu.

Even if the damage can be repaired and even if it was an isolated act... the slogans left behind ("*God bless America!!!*", "*USA winners!*") make it obvious to all that it was intentional and was directed against the policies favourable to nuclear disarmament which Saintes has followed for over ten years, decided unanimously by the City Council.

Unanimously the Council decided in June 2000, on a motion of the Mayor Michel Baron, to affiliate to the international "*Abolition 2000*" network, and unanimously it decided in March 2008 to join "*Mayors for Peace*". These two networks work together for the abolition of nuclear weapons everywhere.

The City of Saintes gave moral and material support to the organizing of the 1st Nuclear Disarmament Days in May 2001, and the 1st, 2nd & 3rd Rallies for International Disarmament, Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (RID-NBC) in 2004, 2006 and 2008; during those last two rallies the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Trees were planted.

The *Nuclear Disarmament Flame*, lit during the 2001 gathering by Mme Schmitt, Mayor of Saintes, has subsequently been re-lit periodically by several civic figures of varying political stripes. It is the first flame in the world to have been lit for this purpose, after the "Peace Flame" which burns permanently in Hiroshima.

In July 2004 the *Hiroshima World Peace Mission*, visiting Europe, specially wished [to come here](#). Mme Schmitt was away at a ministerial meeting and could not be present to welcome the delegation in the Town Hall, but her deputy Mme Gacel represented her, along with her cabinet head M. Texier. The 9-strong delegation from Japan included 2 *hibakushas* (bomb-survivors), who re-lit the Nuclear Disarmament Flame and carried it through the city.

Since then, the Mayor of Hiroshima (1.2 million inhabitants) has had a special relationship with Saintes (26 531 inhabitants, as of 2009). Being also the president of *Mayors for Peace*, which now links over 4000 cities worldwide (including 100 in France), Mr Tadatoshi Akiba was patron for the 3rd RID-NBC, which were opened by a message he sent then, read by his personal envoy Pol d'Huyvetter, coordinator of the international campaign *Vision 2020 (No nuclear Weapons by 2020)*.

Another coordinator of *Mayors for Peace*, Steve Leeper, closely follows events in Saintes. A US citizen, he works in Hiroshima. He has asked us to give more information about the act of vandalism so that he can write a report to the Hiroshima city authorities.

How will the people of Saintes, how will the City and its councillors react to the vandalism against the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Trees? The above details from the past give an idea of the symbolic importance that this might have, in France and abroad.

Peter Nicholls, a British academic who came to our international gatherings in 2001 and 2004, has written to say: *"Very sad. But I don't think a French person could do that. Only an American would write 'God bless America' (...) I think it would be good if the acts were found to be not those of a Saintes resident."*

But whether it was a local or a visitor, a French person or a foreigner, it is above all important that the City express indignation at the actions and distance itself from them.

A world of peace, a world without war, a world without terror, a world without weapons of mass destruction, *"a world without nuclear weapons"* to quote the unanimous objective adopted by the UN Security Council on 24 September 2009, is not just desirable. It is possible, provided that the people of the world take possession of the matter. More and more of the world's cities, which are also nuclear targets, are taking up the issue. Saintes chose to do so and has reaffirmed this constantly since June 2000, thereby proving that it is possible to transcend political divisions for this cause that is essential to the survival of humankind.

Mesdames et Messieurs, civic dignitaries of Saintes, you will be able to solemnly renew that commitment, which is common and not partisan, by participating, with your symbols of office, at the protest gathering scheduled for Wednesday 15 September at 6pm on the site of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Trees. The impact of that could carry a long distance.

If you cannot attend physically, you can send a message of solidarity to be read during the gathering.

Thanking you in advance,

For ACDN executive office

Jean-Marie Matagne, Catherine Moreau, Jean-Philippe Chatain

ARTICLE OF THE DIARY "SUD OUEST"

Peaceful Protest

35 people have met to denounce the vandalism on the site of two very symbolic trees.

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Thirty-five people gathered yesterday at 6 p.m. on the Prairie de la Palu, at the site where the Hiroshima and Nagasaki trees stand. On Sunday morning the plaques beside these trees had been found loosened and uprooted (see Tuesday's Sud Ouest), with slogans scrawled in black felt pen: "God bless America" and "USA winners".

Support from elected representatives

Three associations - ACDN, la Chorale humanitaire (the humanitarian choir) and the Mouvement de la paix - had jointly signed a media release calling people to come and protest the attack on these peaceful symbols planted in 2006 and 2008. The President of ACDN, Jean-Marie Matagne, condemned the behaviour of the culprit(s). Today everyone or nearly everyone is in favour of a world without nuclear weapons, he said vehemently, before castigating the vandals' "inhuman and death-carrying ideology".

"The Town Council of Hiroshima and the leaders of the 'Mayors for Peace' network are closely following events in Saintes," he added. He read out letters of support from Catherine Quéré MP and the assistant Mayor of Saintes, Martine Tiberj, who holds the education portfolio.

Catherine Gaillard-Remontet, the Council Member responsible for the Prairie de la Palu, assured the gathering that technical services would restore the site today. Also today ACDN is going to lodge a legal "action against persons unknown". *

[Saintes](#) - [Charente-Maritime](#) - [Catherine Quéré](#)

* **Note from ACDN:** It turns out that a legal action for damaged property can be lodged only by its owners. Since the plaques belong to the municipality and are on communal ground, only the Mayor can do so. That is what the Mayor and City of Saintes have decided to do.

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15 septembre 2010. Photo François des Mesnards, hebdomadaire la Haute Saintonge