

The opening of the archives on French nuclear testing is a necessity for truth and justice

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Official “transparency”

What effect have the nuclear tests carried out by France in Polynesia from 1966 to 1996 had on the health of the people and their environment? The person who asked the defence ministry this question most recently, Emile Vernaudon, received the following answer:

“In a concern for transparency, the French government asked the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)¹ to conduct a scientific mission on the radiological effects of French nuclear tests in Polynesia. The results were published in May 1998. [The IAEA] clearly concluded that there are not and will not be any health effects that can be medically diagnosed and that no corrective measures are necessary for reasons of radiological protection on the atolls. An epidemiological study has been conducted by experts of the Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (National Health and Medical Research Institute, INSERM). It shows that no significant increase in the frequency of cancers can be proven in the islands located less than 500 km from the Mururoa and Fangataufa atolls...”
(1)

With these reassuring remarks of the minister, backed by internationally recognised experts, the Polynesian deputy can do no more than close the dossier and calm his electorate. Moreover, his request that the archives on testing be opened is null and void: It is a matter of “defence secrecy” which can be lifted only after sixty years.

I Untraceable documents

The Defence minister’s answer leaves the citizen - and the researcher - somewhat perplexed. Rather than to be satisfied with official commentaries it seems reasonable to apprise oneself of the consequences of the tests by consulting the reports and documents cited by the minister.

First surprise: the vaunted report of the IAEA is not available in France! The official French publications service (La Documentation française, an entity responsible to the services of the prime minister) has not published the IAEA report. To obtain a copy, it is necessary to buy it from the headquarters of the IAEA in Vienna (Austria). (2) Not very convenient for the “ordinary” citizen! Once this step has been carried out, the reader will be astonished: the IAEA’s report on the “Radiological Situation on the Mururoa and Fangataufa Atolls” consists of seven volumes, of which only the principle report has been translated into French. The six other volumes (technical reports) are in English.

Second surprise: the epidemiological study conducted by experts from INSERM is available neither at INSERM, which has not published it, nor at the Délégation à l’Information et à la Communication de la Défense (Delegation for Defence Information and Communication, DICOD) which is the information service of the Defence Ministry. We strongly urge citizens who want to be informed to request, themselves, these two documents from these bodies.
(3)

¹ IAEA = AIEA: Agence Internationale de l’Energie Atomique

II The IAEA occults the atmospheric testing period

Nobody contests today that the nuclear atmospheric tests have been the most harmful in terms of both environmental contamination and the health of the people who have been subject to the fallout. This is why, in 1963, the United States, Russia, and Great Britain decided to discontinue such tests. France, however, carried out 46 atmospheric tests in Polynesia starting in 1966, abandoning them only under international pressure in 1974. Now curiously, the IAEA writes that its mandate

“refers only to the present and future radiological situation on the atolls and not to the doses received by the residents of the South Pacific because of and at the time of the atmospheric tests carried out between 1966 and 1974, or by the people who participated in the realisation of the nuclear test program.” (4)

Thus, out of the 2000 pages of the IAEA report distributed at Vienna, only an appendix of six pages is devoted to *“the retrospective evaluation of the radiation doses attributable to atmospheric tests above the atolls.” (5)* It is as if the situation in the city of Hiroshima today were studied without taking into account the consequences of the American bombardment of 1945.

III. Contaminated and weakened atolls

In spite of this unbelievable omission, the IAEA report contains disquieting information:

- first, the IAEA experts did not themselves carry out all the measurements that they cite in their report, but a great part comes from information furnished by the French Defence Ministry which, moreover, did not answer all the requests put forward by the IAEA;
- contrary to what French officials constantly affirm in regard to the absolute tightness of the underground tests, the IAEA report attests that “releases” of radioactive elements (notably Tritium) have occurred *“because of leaks coming from a certain number of chimney cavities created by underground nuclear tests.” (6)* The IAEA even states that leaks of radioactive elements will continue to occur in future years.
- the IAEA experts tell us that eight kilograms of plutonium (distributed in very fine particles) are still found in the lagoons and on the coral shores of Moruroa and Fangataufa and that concentrations of radioactive tritium from the leaks, particles of plutonium, of americium, and of cesium 137 have been found on the two atolls. (7)

All these radioelements are extremely harmful; scientists state that “at levels above 0.005 micrograms in the body, plutonium is dangerous for people. (8)

- the IAEA experts also inform us that the geological stability of the atolls has been compromised. Thus, one can read in the report:

“The underground nuclear tests have caused destabilisation of the sides of the atoll, resulting in underwater cave-ins at the southern and northern crowns. These events are troublesome, because the deformation is continuing even though the tests have ceased. French authorities are maintaining permanent surveillance over these movements, which involve a risk of the slipping of carbonate formations. Depending on the site of the slippage, some radioactivity could be released into the ocean.” (9)

This concern was confirmed subsequently in another official geological report, financed by France, which announces that the Fangataufa atoll also is threatened. (10) How does it happen that right up to the present time, French authorities have always denied the existence of faults and fissures on Mururoa? In 1995, the daily “Le Monde”, which had published the map of the faults on Mururoa, known since 1980, was even threatened with legal action by the Minister of Foreign Affairs!

IV. The contradictory content and conclusions of the IAEA report.

The conclusions of the IAEA are at odds with the gravity of the facts reported throughout the report: despite all of the problems mentioned above, the IAEA considers that any corrective measure (rehabilitation and decontamination) is unnecessary on Mururoa and on Fangataufa and that the surveillance of the atolls is no longer necessary.

Although the IAEA has in no way taken up the epidemiological dimension of the consequences of the tests, the study concludes that there will be no health effect that can be medically diagnosed. The IAEA even announces in advance that subsequent epidemiological studies will not be able to attribute any effects on people's health to residual radioactive substances on Mururoa or Fangataufa.

These conclusions are scandalous and appear designed to clear France of any responsibility for either the personnel who have worked at the test sites or the Polynesian population.

V The INSERM cancer study: a truncated official presentation.

On July 30, 1998, the Ministry of Defence announced, in a communique, the results of an investigation entitled "The Incidence of Cancer in Polynesia between 1985 and 1995", which had been requested by the "Direction des Centres d' Experimentation Nucleaire (Department of Nuclear Test Centers, DIRCEN) on June 12, 1996. The INSERM report, totalling 140 pages (of which 94 are tables), had as its objective the filling of the gap in the Polynesian Cancer Registry that did not take into account the cases of cancer in relation to the geographical distance from the test sites. INSERM counted 2880 Polynesian natives who had developed cancer between 1985 and 1995, the only period available in the Registry.

The authors note at the beginning of the conclusion that "*no significant increase in the incidence of cancer, taken all together or separately, could be shown on the islands or atolls located less than 500 kilometers from Mururoa, compared to the rest of French Polynesia or the rest of the Tuamotu-Gambier archipelagos.*" (11) This part of the conclusion has been repeated by the Ministry of Defence and by the media, which have obviously not had the opportunity to read the rest of the report (See above).

VI The important reservations of the INSERM researchers

The second part of the conclusion of the INSERM report is worth emphasising because it so much constitutes a questioning of the first part. In fact, the reservations, presented by the authors, constitute half of the conclusion! Here they are:

- the geographic study of INSERM "*does not, however, make it possible to study the consequences of a possible generalised geographic contamination, and does not replace a possible study of the former workers at the site.*" This study has still not been conducted.
- the INSERM study is on a period beginning ten years after the end of atmospheric testing. "*This delay favours the study of a possible increase in the incidence of solid tumors due to local fallout, but is less helpful in the case of leukemia.*" Chernobyl has taught us that cases of leukemia appear within several years, in particular among children.
- the INSERM study notes that "*the incidence of thyroid cancer for women, as for men, was greater in French Polynesia than in the two reference populations (natives of Hawai'i and New Zealand). A study in greater depth of these cancers is now necessary.*" This study has not been carried out.
- the INSERM study notes that "*the results observed among subjects who were children during the atmospheric tests indicate that a similar study ought to be conducted later, when these subjects are older.*" This study has still not been conducted.

VII The legitimate questioning of the Polynesians

The Polynesians — political leaders and representatives of the population — have not been associated at all with the inquiries or studies of the IAEA and INSERM. Just as during the period of the tests when no one was consulted, French authorities have not solicited the opinion of the Polynesians in drawing up the balance sheet after the definitive end of the tests. Likewise French authorities have not associated them with the system for monitoring the atolls that has been set in place. Today, it is important to say precisely about whom we speak when we designate “the Polynesians.”

In a general manner, it can be said that the present Polynesian government, directed by M. Gaston Flosse, has never manifested the slightest criticism of the French nuclear tests. This government has profited, and profits still, from the French manna tied to the installation of the test sites and has never questioned French leaders about the consequences of the tests on the health of the populations or of the environment in which the citizens live. The present government of Gaston Flosse has been content to accept and to support the discourse on the harmlessness of the French tests developed thirty years ago by the French authorities.

When we speak of the “Polynesians,” we refer to the institutions, associations, political or other groups who have spoken and acted in ways that emphasise their sense of responsibility regarding their fellow citizens. Since the beginning of the atmospheric tests, some representative Polynesians (such as the poet, Henry Hiro, now deceased), some elected officials who first advocated autonomy and then independence, some environmental protection associations, some non-governmental organisations, and the synods of the Evangelical Church of French Polynesia have protested, have demonstrated, have taken steps in public on numerous occasions to oppose the French nuclear tests, and have claimed the right to examine their consequences. Is it not surprising, for example, that the only sociological study of Polynesians who worked at the nuclear sites was carried out in 1996 at the demand of the NGO Hiti Tau and the Evangelical Church with the support of the Ecumenical World Council of Churches? It is curious that those “Polynesians” who have proven, since the beginning of the nuclear era, their sense of responsibility for their fellow citizens are those who are practically never consulted about the conduct and future of their country by the authorities of the Republic. The only people with whom the authorities of the metropolitan administration talk are those very people who have defended only their own interests with no concern for the welfare and the future of the people for whom they are responsible.

Polynesian culture closely associates man with the land, i.e with his environment. It appears obvious to anyone who has had the opportunity to fly over Polynesia that the islands, such fragile bands of land in the immensity of the ocean, are like floating planks that the resident populations grasp for survival. To undermine the land is to undermine the very life of the Polynesians. In the same way, to harm the ocean is to compromise a large part of their nutritional survival, particularly in proteins. The nuclear tests — both atmospheric and underground — are considered by the Polynesians as a violation of their fundamental rights to existence. They believe that it is legitimate that the truth be known about the totality of the consequences of these tests, in the name of this generation and those to come. Many are they who denounce the lie that has surrounded the speech of the French military authorities since 1966, a lie made more obvious since knowledge about the effects of ionizing radiation on health and the environment has been in the public domain. A recent statement by Pastor Jacques Ihorai, President of the Evangelical Church of French Polynesia, sums up the questions of the Polynesians:

“They want to force us to forget one period — Oh, what a tragic one for us! — to begin a new one, no longer with the threatening noises of nuclear tests, but with the mortal and very present silence, beneath our feet, of the 141 shafts of radioactive waste...So I have trouble understanding how people can close their eyes at night when they have done in other people’s lands what they have refused to do in their own! What is surprising or unreasonable about claiming the right to

know and to be respected in your love of life?...The Evangelical Church of French Polynesia has good reason to worry about the nuclear problem in Polynesia and to react in favour of the health of the Polynesians and their environment. In order to inform itself, the Church has good reason to have access to all of the data on the 30 years of nuclear tests on Fangataufa and on Mururoa, in Polynesia, and in the Pacific. May her cry be heard by the French government!" (12)

In the eyes of the large nations, the Polynesians are a "small people" who have trouble making their voice heard, all the more so because the French political authorities do not wish to hear their appeals. Is it not the duty of the moral authorities of our country to make themselves relentlessly and firmly the "spokespeople" for the Polynesians, not only in French society but just as much to political officials? For truth and justice.

VIII. Bibliography

1. Journal officiel Assemblée nationale, Questions, 13 December 1999, p. 7129.
2. The CDRPC obtained the report by participating in the conference that was held at Vienna at the end of June--beginning of July 1998, at the seat of the AIEA.
3. The CDRPC was able to obtain the INSERM report by other (unofficial) means when it came out in July 1998. It is entitled: (Incidence of cancers in French Polynesia between 1985 and 1995. Influence of the place of birth and residence in relation to the Mururoa atoll.) Final report; Florent de Vathaire*, Béatrice Le Vu*, Cécile Challeton-de-Vathaire** (* INSERM, Unité de recherche en épidémiologie des cancers, U351, Institut Gustave Roussy; ** Office de Protection contre les Rayonnements Ionisants)
4. Situation radiologique sur les atolls de Mururoa et de Fangataufa, AIEA, 1998, Rapport succinct, p. 60
5. Situation radiologique sur les atolls de Mururoa et de Fangataufa, AIEA, 1998, Rapport principal, p. 253 à 259
6. Situation radiologique sur les atolls de Mururoa et de Fangataufa, AIEA, 1998, Rapport principal, p. 241
7. Rapport principal p. 241 à 243
8. Science et Vie, December 1992
9. Rapport principal, p. 171
10. Commission presided over by Charles Fairhurst, Problems of Stability and hydrology tied to the French nuclear tests in Polynesia, La Documentation française, 1999
11. Rapport INSERM, p. 39
12. Vea Porotetani, septembre 1999

Anmerkung der Pazifik-Informationsstelle:

Der vorliegende Text ist eine Übersetzung und Zusammenfassung eines französischen Berichtes von Bruno Barrillot. Das Cahier No 1: "Le 'démantèlement' des sites d'essais nucléaires/ La surveillance des anciens sites d'essais nucléaires/ Le programme de simulation des essais nucléaires" (hrsg. im Januar 2000) kann gegen Rechnung bezogen werden bei:

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