

(reprinted with permission from the Guardian, 11 February 1982)

The island they blasted and damned

In Polynesian, Mururoa or (more correctly) Moruroa means "place of a great secret." In the past two decades, however, the unknown native secret of the atoll bearing this name has been overtaken by a modern secret beyond the imagining of the ancient islanders. Most of us, when we think of Pacific islands, think of beaches and palm trees and cloudless skies and smiling beauties with flowers in their hair. Yet, for a small minority the thought of a Pacific island produces an urge to blast it with nuclear weapons.

Since 1966 Moruroa has been subjected to more than 80 nuclear explosions detonated at the behest of the French Government. By the end of 1981 Moruroa had begun to yield up not only its new and dismaying "great secret," but also some of the secret's radioactive corollaries. How did this island paradise become a blot on the Pacific ?

France set off her first nuclear weapons test in 1960, in the atmosphere above the Sahara desert; it was followed by three more in the atmosphere and 13 underground. But the French colony of Algeria was already in ferment, and shortly thereafter achieved its independence from France. French President Charles de Gaulle, in hot pursuit of la gloire, had no intention of letting the loss of Algeria halt the testing of French nuclear weapons. But somehow the idea of detonating nuclear explosions on the sacred soil of France itself did not appeal to him.

So he instructed his minions to seek out another site, as remote as possible. They chose the Tuamotu archipelago in French Polynesia, 1,500 kilometres south-east of Tahiti and 20,000 kilometres from Paris. The French plan met with stubborn opposition from the 120,000 Polynesians and their elected Territorial Assembly, but the French government took no notice. French Polynesia was to become the home of the French Centre d'Experimentation Pacifique - although the experiments which were to follow were anything but pacific.

The CEP moved into the Tuamotu atolls of Moruroa and Fangataufa in 1964 and set up an airstrip, a wharf and every variety of other facility. On July 2 1966 the French military authorities detonated a nuclear device aboard a barge anchored in the Moruroa lagoon. The second nuclear test was scheduled for September 10 1966, with de Gaulle present to witness it.

The wind direction was unfavourable, and would have carried fallout to all of the Pacific islands west of Moruroa: so the test was postponed. The following day the wind was just as unfavourable; but de Gaulle, declaring that he was a busy man, insisted that the test take place. A 120-kiloton device was duly triggered, delivering fallout at least as far as Western Samoa, nearly 3,000 kilometres downwind.

The lofty callousness of this exercise was to set the pattern for the coming years. The Polynesians themselves were told nothing about fallout or other radioactive contamination or its possible public health effects. Until June 1968 public health statistics for Polynesia were issued monthly, with details on deaths and their causes, diseases and epidemics. Just before the first nuclear explosion the regular publication of the health statistics ceased, and has never resumed. This was only one of the many measures by means of which the French authorities of the CEP kept their Polynesian hosts in the dark about French nuclear activities. However, the dark was frequently punctuated with unholy brightness from Moruroa. By the end of 1974, 41 nuclear devices been exploded in the atmosphere at Moruroa and Fangataufa.

During this eight-year period the test programme stirred a mounting international outcry. In June 1972 the UN Conference on the Human Environment taking place in Stockholm voted overwhelmingly to condemn the French nuclear tests. In 1972 and 1973 flotillas of boats sailed into the test zone, including in 1973 the frigate *Otago* of the New Zealand Navy, and the yacht *Greenpeace III*, whose crew was attacked on the high seas by the French Navy.

Protests from other Pacific countries, including New Zealand, Peru, Japan and Australia added to the diplomatic uproar, and on June 8, 1974 President Giscard d'Estaing announced that from 1975 tests would be conducted underground. He underlined his point by commencing forthwith a final series of seven tests in the atmosphere.

When the tests went underground so, to some extent, did the international protests. After all, the US, the UK, the USSR and China were still testing nuclear weapons underground: China indeed was testing them in the air. Three of these countries, however, were at least setting off their explosions on their own territory - and the UK contribution to the underground activities in New Mexico was puny compared with the US effort.

The French, however, had in less than 20 years shredded the social fabric of French Polynesia with their weapons programme. They had employed the islanders briefly during the construction phase of the CEP facilities, prompting them to leave their islands in the thousands, with many moving to Tahiti. Then the islanders found their income cut off, as construction work ended; but by this time their traditional activities of fishing and copra production had collapsed.

From being able to feed themselves with ease, Polynesians found themselves living on imported beans and corned beef. Domestic agitation about the nuclear testing programme came up against an ugly reality: by the late 1970s the CEP was responsible for some 90 per cent of the economic activity of French Polynesia.

Nevertheless the anger and agitation persisted and grew. On July 6, 1979, an explosion and fire in a subterranean laboratory on Moruroa killed one man outright; another died in hospital and four more were flown to Paris for treatment. According to the French authorities the accident was non-nuclear. According to the workers, however, the whole area was scraped and scrubbed for two weeks by workers in protective suits, in an attempt to clean up the scattered plutonium.

Two weeks later, on July 25, 1979, a nuclear device stuck part way down its underground shaft, at a point where the shaft was still passing through coral, before it reached the basalt bed rock within which the device should have been tested. Rather than try to recover the device, the testers went ahead and set it off. The resulting explosion registered 6.3 on the Richter scale, and apparently dislodged a slab of the inner wall of the atoll, sending a tidal wave or tsunami across the lagoon, which roared up the opposite beach and injured seven people. After the blast a crack appeared on the surface of the island, 40cm wide and 2 km long.

It was an ominous development. In 1975 'safety tests' had scattered several kilograms of plutonium on the North Beach of the atoll. Rather than clean it up, the authorities had simply covered the plutonium with a layer of asphalt. The asphalt floor then became part of a radioactive waste dump, eventually covering some 30,000 square metres with drums and black plastic bags of contaminated debris.

The authorities knew that the atoll facilities might be vulnerable to storms. As the underground test progressed, successive blasts crumbled the atoll's coral foundations; within five years the surface had subsided nearly two metres. The authorities transferred buildings near the water's edge farther inland. But the North Beach rubbish dump with its plutonium floor stayed where it was.

On March 22 1981, a tropical storm hit the atoll. A powerful swell thundered onto the North Beach, ripping apart the asphalt cover of the spilt plutonium and sweeping chunks of asphalt, drums and torn bags of radioactive waste into the waters around the atoll. The authorities ordered a clean-up, but the more debris the workers collected, the more there was still washing ashore. The authorities insisted that daily routine ought to be maintained: "swimming and beach games are vital to keep up morale" - but swimmers were advised to keep their mouths closed while in the water.

CEP staff were acutely unhappy. A group of civil engineers met with French Defence Minister Charles Hernu in Paris in July, 1981, and Hernu in turn agreed to pay a visit to Moruroa. The site authorities at once undertook a hasty cosmetic clean-up. "And then," said one of the indignant engineers, "it was as if God or Fate were on our side." On the eve of Hernu's arrival, another violent storm hit the atoll, leaving it once again in radioactive chaos. Hernu stepped off his plane to find himself surrounded by masked figures in protective clothing gathering debris, amid Keep Out signs and barbed wire.

He promised immediate action; but by November 1981, "nothing, strictly nothing" had been done, according to the engineers. In their fury they deposited their dossier of evidence in a Swiss bank, with instructions that it was to be published if they were arrested; and, since the official media did not want to know, they arranged to have their story broadcast over a pirate radio station in France.

The French authorities were unmoved. Nevertheless they did let it be known that they were thinking of abandoning the test site on Moruroa, for reasons they did not explain. The sister atoll of Fangataufa, once mooted as the next target area, was known to be heavily contaminated from earlier tests: and the suggestion surfaced that within the next two or three years the CEP would take its show on the road, possibly to the Kerguelan islands in the South Indian Ocean.

Should this in due course come to pass, the French testers will leave behind in their Polynesian colony a shambles: social unrest, a disrupted economy, at least two atolls barely fit for human habitation. So the mad nuclear tea party rolls on. What's the French for "Clean cup - move down"?

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