CHAPTER FIVE

THE LEGACY OF FRENCH NUCLEAR TESTING
IN THE PACIFIC

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I. Introduction

The French began a nuclear testing program in the Pacific in the 1960s and completed it in the 1990s. For more than forty years, the French government remained secretive about the testing, allowing researchers minimal or no access to either the data it collected or the atolls where the testing took place. This Chapter examines the legacy of French nuclear testing in the Pacific, which, after thirty years of governmental denial, is beginning to come to light.

Part I provides a basic overview of the Chapter. Part II discusses the political dimensions of the French nuclear testing in the Pacific, focusing on the atolls where the testing took place and international opposition to the testing. Part III gives an overview of the environmental concerns resulting from the testing. Part IV summarizes the findings of the few scientific studies that the French government permitted to conduct on the atolls. Part V discusses the implications of international law on the French testing. Finally, Part VI gives a conclusion and several recommendations to help minimize the impact of the testing on the environment or human health.

II. The Political Dimension of French Nuclear Testing in the Pacific

In 1962, despite the opposition of the French Polynesia Territorial Assembly, President Charles de Gaulle decided to establish nuclear facilities (Centre d’Expérimentation du Pacifique) on two uninhabited atolls of the Tuamotu group (Mururoa and Fangataufa), after the loss

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of Algeria, where nuclear tests had previously been conducted. Mururoa is a coral ringed atoll located 750 miles from Tahiti. It covers an area of about six miles by eighteen miles. Fangataufa, the other atoll chosen for the tests measures five miles long and four miles wide. It is located twenty-six miles south of Mururoa and is the southermost atoll of the Tuamotu.

Between 1966 and 1974, forty-four atmospheric nuclear tests were performed: thirty-nine in Mururoa and five in Fangataufa. The shift from atmospheric to underground tests in 1975 was a direct consequence of international pressure against the tests, including legal action by New Zealand at the International Court of Justice.

Between 1975 and 1986, seventy-eight underground nuclear tests were performed despite continuous opposition by elected representatives of the French Polynesia territorial assembly as well as international campaigns against the tests which led to terrorist action by the French State, also known as the “Rainbow Warrior” Affair. In 1986, the ex-director of the French Secret Services (DGSE) declared that he was personally authorized by President François Mitterrand to sink the Greenpeace vessel _Rainbow Warrior_ which was used to campaign against nuclear testing at Mururoa Atoll.

In 1992, France agreed to observe a moratorium on its nuclear testing activities which was also followed by the U.S., Russia and the U.K. Yet, in June 1995, President Chirac decides to resume the French nuclear testing program, thus reactivating international protests. The French nuclear testing program was completed in 1998; the total yield of the French nuclear tests between 1966 and 1996 was approximately 13.5 Mt, a much smaller amount than the 170 Mt produced by the U.S. and the U.K. nuclear tests in the Pacific between 1946 and 1962. That same year, France was readmitted as an observer to the Pacific Forum and ratified the Rarotonga Nuclear Free Zone Treaty. All nuclear testing facilities were dismantled in 1998, with only thirty Légionnaires remaining on Mururoa Atoll to monitor radioactivity, monitor geological movements and prevent intrusion. The same year, France ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

In 2005, for the first time, a French court granted financial compensation to an ex-soldier who developed a disease linked to his participation

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