

Nuclear-Free South Pacific?

by Glenn Barlow

At the annual meeting of the South Pacific Forum in 1985, the 14 member nations gave their unanimous approval to an international treaty now pending in the United Nations to declare the entire South Pacific region a Nuclear Free Zone. Australia insisted on an amendment that allows adherents to permit access to their territories by (U.S.) ships and planes carrying nuclear weapons, and powered by nuclear reactors. Other than the American and French military presence, the entire South Pacific is now free of nuclear reactors, labs, waste sites, and weapons.

Critics of the Australian amendment said that it took the teeth out of the treaty. The winning argument was that the United States would veto the proposal without the amendment. Kiribas, a former British colony, has signed a fishing treaty with the Soviet Union. The United States argues that this could be the beginning of a Soviet presence in the South Pacific. The United States could have bid for the same fishing agreement, but it chose not to spend even that small amount of money necessary to keep an island ally.

FRENCH NUCLEAR TESTING

France, of course, opposes the entire proposal for a Nuclear Free Zone. France has refused to allow its colonies in the South Pacific to participate in international proceedings.

Since the first nuclear explosion on a barge in the lagoon at Moruroa Atoll on

to sign the treaty. International pressure finally forced the testing underground in 1975. The opposition is still strong and growing.

Between 1966 and 1975, France exploded 41 nuclear devices in the atmosphere at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls, in the

health effects of radiation passed by the local territorial assembly. Prior to 1966, statistics relating to deaths and their causes were published on a monthly basis.

In September of 1966, President De Gaulle visited Moruroa to observe a nuclear test. The testing was delayed, waiting for

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eastern end of the Tuamotu archipelago. Since 1975, France has conducted more than 70 nuclear tests underground at Moruroa.

The New Zealand National Radiological Laboratory continually monitored the radiation released from French tests, concluding that radiation levels in New Zealand rose substantially during the atmospheric testing program.

Once the testing program was announced in 1963, Governor Grimald declared that "no radioactive particle will ever fall on an inhabited island."

In 1966, when the Centre d'Experimentation du Pacifique (CEP) announced that the first tests would begin shortly, they declared a danger zone around Moruroa

wind conditions that would not carry fallout to inhabited areas. Finally, after two days, De Gaulle ordered the test to proceed, despite continuing unfavorable winds. Radioactive fallout reached all of the islands west of Moruroa within days or hours. High levels of radioactivity were measured in rainwater catchment in Western Samoa, 2,000 miles away. No figures have ever been released for the extent of contamina-

July 2, 1966, there has been widespread opposition to French testing throughout the Pacific. Even though the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963 banned nuclear explosions in the atmosphere, France maintained that "technological reasons" prevented it from conducting underground tests, and refused

which included seven inhabited atolls!

Although continually denying that the tests posed any threat to either local people or the environment, shortly before the first test government officials stopped publishing public health statistics, despite repeated resolutions requesting information on the



tion in French Polynesia.

Along with concerns for environmental and health effects from the continuation of tests at Moruroa, both long term and short term, are the political considerations of the people of neighboring Pacific Island nations. The Fifteenth South Pacific Forum, which was held in August of 1984, "reiterated their strong opposition to continued nuclear testing in the South Pacific Region by France or any other country."

When the French announced that they planned to continue nuclear testing at Moruroa through the end of the century to "perfect their nuclear strike force" the announcement brought vehement protest from all corners of the Pacific, despite French assurances that the tests are miniaturized, and will be carried out deep within the lagoon. In the words of New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange: "It does not matter whether the tests are large or small. What is offensive . . . is that the French continue their testing at all — despite the unequivocal official and public opposition not only within New Zealand but also throughout the South Pacific region. We deplore this disregard of our joint protests and reaffirm our desire that these tests, and all other nuclear tests, should stop."