

Support for nuclear veterans in the Pacific

Sixty years ago this month, the UK government exploded a 2.8 megaton thermonuclear weapon, codename Grapple Y, at Christmas Island in the central Pacific. This was one of nine atmospheric nuclear tests during Operation Grapple, the program to develop the British hydrogen bomb.

As leaders gather in London for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), we call for justice for the survivors of these nuclear tests.

We write to you as participants in Operation Grapple - sailors and soldiers from New Zealand and Fiji who supported the British Empire in the 1950s. Between May 1957 and September 1958, we served in the armed forces during the nuclear tests held at Malden Island and Christmas (Kiritimati) Island in the British Gilbert and Ellice Islands - today part of the Pacific nation of Kiribati.

We call on the British Prime Minister and government to fulfil promises made 60 years ago, to address the health and environmental consequences of the UK nuclear weapons program.

Nearly 14,000 British troops travelled to the central Pacific for the H-bomb testing program, but other Commonwealth countries were also involved. New Zealand sent aircraft and two naval frigates with 551 New Zealand sailors to support the tests. The British colony of Fiji supplied 276 Fijian participants from the Royal Fiji Military Force and the Fiji Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. Dozens of Gilbertese islanders worked as labourers to support the military operation. Commonwealth countries like Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji and Australia hosted radiation monitoring stations.

In the decades since the H-bomb tests, successive British governments have argued that there was no danger to participants from radioactive fallout. But as survivors of the tests, we have lost friends and colleagues to cancer, leukaemia and other illnesses that can be caused by exposure to ionising radiation. This includes Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, the distinguished Fijian leader who witnessed the second Grapple test on Malden Island and later served as Governor General and President of Fiji.

The UK government talks of the extensive safety precautions for the tests, to reduce exposure to radiation. But we know the reality. Many participants went without safety gear or radiation badges. Some were used for difficult, dirty and dangerous tasks like dumping drums of nuclear material in the ocean or killing birds blinded by the flash of a megaton hydrogen bomb. There were many pathways to ingest or inhale radioactive isotopes.

Independent medical studies, such as research conducted by Professor Al Rowland at Massey University in New Zealand, have documented significant chromosomal translocations amongst the New Zealand sailors who joined the naval task force for Operation Grapple.

This evidence of genetic damage raises concern about possible intergenerational effects for our children and grandchildren. Children of Gilbertese plantation workers on the island suffered eye damage and other health effects from the nuclear detonations. Survivors on Christmas (Kiritimati) Island have formed the 'Association of Cancer Patients Affected by the British and American Bomb Tests.'

Today, governments and citizens across the Pacific region call for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Many Pacific governments - Kiribati, Tuvalu, New Zealand, Fiji, Samoa and more - have signed the new UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This treaty has important provisions which oblige countries to support environmental remediation and assistance for the victims of the use and testing of nuclear weapons.

We thank our own governments for the medical and financial support they have already given, but believe the primary responsibility lies with the UK government. Sixty years after Operation Grapple, we call on Prime Minister Theresa May for urgent action:

- The British government should provide compensation, medical support and environmental rehabilitation to all people affected by Operation Grapple, including New Zealand and Fijian military personnel and i-Kiribati living on Kiritimati Island.
- The British government should provide funds for an independent medical study to investigate potential intergenerational health effects for the children and grandchildren of Operation Grapple participants from New Zealand, Kiribati and Fiji - as it has done for UK veterans.
- The British government should meet its obligations under Article 6 of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) “to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective control.”

We call on all Commonwealth countries - including the three nuclear weapon states United Kingdom, India and Pakistan - to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, with its important provisions on assistance for survivors of nuclear testing.

As fellow citizens of the Commonwealth, we look to the citizens of the United Kingdom to support our call for justice.



Roy Sefton QSM, Palmerston North, New Zealand

- Former sailor, HMNZS Pukaki, witnessed five nuclear tests
- Chair, New Zealand Nuclear Test Veterans Association (NZNTVA)



Paul Ah Poy, Suva, Fiji

- Former sailor, *Fiji Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve*, witnessed seven nuclear tests
- President, Fiji Nuclear Veterans Association (FNVA)