

50 Years After Test 596

The Effects of Nuclear Testing in East Turkestan

Introduction

As the Chinese Communist Party consolidated its control of the Chinese mainland in the wake of the Nationalist withdrawal, Mao Tse-tung set about his ambition to turn the People's Republic of China (PRC) into a world power in his own lifetime. Key to this was the possession of nuclear weapons and under Mao's instructions an ambitious nuclear programme was rapidly developed at great human, economic, and environmental cost to China and its people. Within a decade the PRC was able to test its first nuclear weapon at Lop Nor in East Turkestan which inaugurated three decades of nuclear testing that ended in 1996. Once a centre for ancient trade, Lop Nor is also a region of important Turkic archaeology but undercover reports from the largely sealed off area reveal high levels of illness associated with radioactive contamination that potentially affects millions of people.

Background

The PRC began developing its nuclear weapons programme in 1951 following a secret agreement with Moscow which exchanged Soviet assistance for Tibetan uranium. Although this cooperation ended in the 1960s, the PRC made rapid progress and detonated its first nuclear bomb, codenamed '596' on October 1964. This was followed by its first hydrogen bomb in June 1967 and in November 1976 with its first aerial nuclear test. In 1996 the PRC signed, but did not ratify, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and testing ended. Today the CTBT remains unenforced, awaiting ratification by forty-four nuclear-capable states.



The Lop Nor Nuclear Test Site

Since 1964, when Beijing conducted its first nuclear test, forty-six confirmed nuclear detonations have taken place at Lop Nor, averaging one test every 284 days. Atmospheric tests ceased in 1980, but between 1969-1996 twenty-two underground tests were undertaken. The tests include thermonuclear blasts, neutron bombs and an atomic bomb allegedly tested covertly on Pakistan's behalf in May 1990. It is known that conducting nuclear tests close to where previous ones were detonated is highly dangerous as it can facilitate fissures in the earth which allow radioactive material to escape into the atmosphere. Urumqi, Turpan, Qumul and Korla are cities in East Turkestan with Uyghur populations that reside within 320km from the test site, with the latter being the closest.

Exposure to Radioactive Material

The total amount of plutonium-239 released into the atmosphere in East Turkestan is estimated to have totalled 48kg, six million times more than the Chernobyl accident, which affected one million people worldwide. Exposure to such radioactive material often causes leukaemia and thyroid, lymphatic and bowel cancers, disabilities and birth defects. Extrapolating the available data, Professor Jun Takada, an expert on the Chinese nuclear tests, believes almost 1.5 million people may have been exposed to radioactive material during the thirty-two years of nuclear testing at Lop Nor. The detonation of nuclear tests during westerly winds also disproportionately affected predominantly Uyghur populations lying downwind.



Issues Concerning Uyghur Communities

Although American and Soviet nuclear tests far exceeded in numbers those conducted by the PRC, the Lop Nor nuclear tests are the world's largest series of tests carried out in a populated area. Today, large numbers of young people have been diagnosed with bowel cancer, leukaemia and other cancers, especially in Korla. International media have reported "conservative" estimates that 194,000 people may have died as a result of the testing, especially as medical treatment was often not available. The PRC continues to deny access to the region for independent researchers to study the effects of the nuclear testing but radioactive material is known to have escaped over the years. A 1997 undercover investigation revealed cancer rates to be 30% higher in East Turkestan than the rest of China according to official records. In hospitals, 90% of cancer patients have blood or lymphatic cancers, typical signs of radioactive exposure. It was predicted that cancer rates would double in East Turkestan between 1993 and 2000 but independent experts and NGOs have been unable to verify such estimates.

Compensation

Several nuclear states have in recent years awarded compensation in varying degrees to those who suffered the after-effects of nuclear testing. The United States has embarked on the most comprehensive compensation programme, and is currently the only nuclear state to award compensation to civilians as well as military personnel. The government of Kazakhstan has been paying compensation in lieu of Russia to victims who suffered from Soviet nuclear testing. Australia has also awarded compensation for the effects of British nuclear testing in the indigenous Maralinga territory. Within the international community there is a growing acceptance of the need to award compensation and to do so in a transparent manner. Nevertheless, the PRC continues to deny any responsibility for the impact of its nuclear programme on civilians, especially towards the Uyghurs of East Turkestan. Efforts to raise awareness of the cost of the PRC's nuclear programme have been prevented or frustrated by Chinese authorities. Sun Xiaodi, a former worker at No. 792 Uranium Mine in Gansu Province, was amongst the few to campaign against nuclear contamination, only to be arrested in 2009 and sentenced to two years 'Re-education-Through Labour'.

Conclusion

To be effective, the PRC must ratify the CTBT and allow for independent research to be conducted to find out the extent to which the Uyghurs and others in East Turkestan have been affected by nuclear testing and to implement necessary measures to provide compensation to the victims. This would bring China in line with current policy developments in the United States and, to a lesser extent, Russia and France. The PRC should recognise their responsibility for the continuing suffering and provide appropriate medical care so that Uyghurs affected by the tests are able to mitigate the effects of exposure to radioactive material. The international community, including the UN, EU and environmental NGOs, must continue to draw attention to this neglected issue and support efforts to help those affected.

About UNPO

The UNPO is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organisation established in 1991. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and territories who have joined to protect and promote their human rights through nonviolent solutions.

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