

May 22, 1963

Research Memorandum RFE-40 from Thomas L. Hughes to the Acting Secretary, 'A French Nuclear Testing Site in the Pacific? - Plans and Repercussions'

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Summary:

France's staging of atmospheric and underground tests in Algeria became increasingly untenable when neighboring African countries protested and even temporarily broke diplomatic relations with Paris. Once Algeria became independent in 1962, French authorities made plans to develop a test site in Polynesia.

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCHResearch Memorandum
RFE-40, May 22, 1963TO : The Acting Secretary
THROUGH: S/S
FROM : INR - Thomas L. Hughes*Thomas L. Hughes*SUBJECT: A French Nuclear Testing Site in the Pacific? -- Plans and Repercussions

This memorandum, prepared at the request of the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, summarizes what we know of French plans for establishing a nuclear testing site in Polynesia and considers existing and likely reactions.

ABSTRACT

France is in the process of establishing a nuclear testing site in the Pacific, approximately 600 nautical miles east of Tahiti. Only in New Zealand has there been a strong reaction to French plans to date. As preparations for the site and testing proceed, however, it is likely that there will be a wider negative response and increasing demands for a nuclear free southern hemisphere.

French Plans

French plans for transferring nuclear testing installations from the Sahara to the Pacific have been increasingly mentioned in the press and other reports since mid-1962. Paris has made no official announcement to this effect and the Defense Ministry has refused to comment publicly on reported plans. In response to Australian Embassy queries, however, French Foreign Minister Couve de Murville stated that a Pacific site for nuclear testing would be selected before the end of the year. Moreover, French General Jean Thiry in a May 1 press interview, stated that France's nuclear test site in the Pacific would be fully operational by 1966.

Recent information from official sources indicates that a nuclear and thermonuclear testing ground will be established in the Tuamotu Archipelago, approximately 600 nautical miles east of Tahiti, 2,300 nautical miles northeast of New Zealand and 3,500 miles west of Chile. Although earlier reports suggested that the island of Mangareva would be selected as the testing site, Mururoa, a small uninhabited atoll, now seems more likely. Fangataufa, also an uninhabited island, will reportedly be used as an observation base, while an observatory will be established on Tureia. To support the operations, a large international class airfield will be constructed on the Island of Hao. Tahiti will serve as the rear base with supply warehouses, laboratories, medical services, and other facilities. Tahitian newspapers have also reported that 300 military engineers arrived in Tahiti in May to commence work on the Mururoa base,

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with a similar number arriving shortly thereafter to begin work on the Hao airfield.

Local Reactions

Within official circles and the business community in Papeete, Tahiti, there appear to be no real objections toward the establishment of a military base in Tahiti. The general attitude of the populace appears to be that the financial benefits that would accrue to French Polynesia from such a base would far outweigh any disadvantages, psychological or otherwise. By and large, however, the population is strongly against the use of such a base for testing nuclear warheads, as was reflected in the October 1962 elections when almost all political parties supported the establishment of a military base, but opposed its use for testing purposes.

Foreign Reactions

Only in New Zealand have there been strong public reactions to reported French plans. Some disquiet has been expressed by the Chief Magistrate of Pitcairn Island. The Government of Chile, like New Zealand and Australia, has officially queried the French as to their plans. United Nations Secretary General U. Thant has requested the French to desist from any testing in the Pacific. The only known bloc references were carried from Budapest in Arabic to the Arab World on April 5, 1963 and from Peiping in Chinese on May 2. The Hungarian broadcast merely repeated an Australian Broadcasting Company's announcement that technicians were due to arrive in Tahiti in April 1963 to prepare for French nuclear tests in the Gambier Islands. The Chinese broadcast repeated a Paris dispatch summarizing French plans as described by French Air Force General J.C. Thiry.

In New Zealand, where there is a strong distaste for nuclear testing by any country, January 1963 press reports from Paris on French plans touched off a wide range of criticism. Prime Minister Holyoake stated that the government had no official confirmation of the reports but, if such confirmation were received, New Zealand would protest and urge the French to reconsider their course of action. The Director of the Dominion X-Ray and Radium Laboratory warned that any French tests in that area would be more dangerous to New Zealand than the United States tests in 1962. Prominent New Zealand scientist Sir Ernest Marsden condemned the proposed tests. Former Opposition Leader Walter Nash described the reported French decision as "a great pity," and A.H. Nordmeyer, Leader of the Opposition, restated Labor's opposition to nuclear testing by anybody, anywhere. Concern was also expressed by the press and a number of organizations, including not only the New Zealand Communist Party and such pacifist groups as the New Zealand Peace Council and the Movement for International Cooperation and Disarmament, but also by the powerful Federation of Labor, the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, and the University of Canterbury School Committees' Association. The New Zealand Federation of Labor intimated that it would ask the New Zealand Government for an economic boycott of France if the French proceeded with their plans. The Federation's president also indicated he would make an issue

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of the matter with the French labor movement and with the International Confederation of Trade Unions.

Prospects for Increased Criticism

Although the prospect of a French nuclear testing site in the South Pacific has to date aroused real excitement only in New Zealand, unfavorable reactions are likely to mount rapidly as French preparations become more apparent.

In Australia, where the subject of nuclear testing is not as agitated a public issue as it is in New Zealand, the Labor Party is likely to seize upon French activities as an opportunity to push its demand for the establishment of the Southern Hemisphere as a nuclear free zone. General public support for this position may increase as further prospective testing comes into the southern hemisphere. The Menzies Government, with only a one-seat working majority in the House of Representatives, may come under increasing pressure to support the nuclear free zone concept and to oppose continued testing. Similar pressures will be felt by the New Zealand Government which faces general elections in November 1963.

Indonesia, which submitted a resolution to the Sixteenth General Assembly calling for the prohibition of all types of nuclear weapons activity in Asia and the Pacific, is likely to mount a propaganda campaign against French plans that will combine anti-colonialist with anti-testing arguments. Support for such a campaign may develop among Pacific Island territories, particularly the Independent State of Western Samoa, which were gravely concerned over the 1962 United States tests in the Pacific.

Opposition to the French plan may also be expected from Chile, which, in concert with Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador, and Bolivia, is supporting the establishment of a nuclear free zone in Latin America.

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