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The military's mess: Johnston Atoll, the army's 'model' chemical disposal facility, is an environmental disaster

by Ed Rampell

Remote Johnston Atoll, despite its location, is no Paradise Island. It's been a dumping ground for lethal weaponry - and atomic bomb testing - since the 1950s. Its current mandate is the burning of up to 6.6 percent of the total U.S. chemical weapons stockpile. (The cache includes some 400,000 weapons, notably mustard gas and 400 tons of nerve gas.) In January 1995, the Army asked for an extension and an additional \$650 million to complete its mission; last May, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) gave the Army a year's grace period.

The Army sought the delay because of what it called "unexpected problems" that included:

* On March 14, 1994, a fire occurred in the explosive containment area of the experimental plant at Johnston, where the U.S. Army incinerates much of its chemical weapons arsenal. According to EPA spokesman Ray Fox, "Rockets are chopped, then dropped down chutes of deactivation furnaces. There was a misfortune - a spark went up through the chute and ignited a rocket. Although there was some damage which necessitated shutdown for a few days, there was no nerve agent release or injury";

* On March 23, 1994, there was an accidental release of live nerve agent GB from a JACADS smokestack. This 25-minute exposure was at least 10 times greater than the EPA's allowable levels. There were no injuries, but JACADS was shutdown for nearly four months;

* On Dec. 24, 1994, there was a fire at JACADS caused by "a coolant line that came apart, spraying coolant on the hot surface of the deactivation furnace. The fire lasted until the coolant burned out. There was soot, but no damage to equipment," according to EPA's Fox.

* JACADS, it seems, gets shut down as often as some rogue nuclear plants. Activist Craig Williams of the Chemical Weapons Working Group (CWWG) and the Kentucky Environmental Foundation (KEE) alleges, "There have been so many shutdowns. JACADS is down more than 50 percent of the time."

But Johnston Atoll's calamities started long before construction of JACADS began in 1985. The island is located outside the boundaries covered by the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone Treaty and is not subject to all U.S. environmental laws.

According to New Zealander Owen Wilkes, a longtime disarmament advocate, "On Johnston Atoll in 1962, the U.S. shot nuclear warheads out into space to study the effects of nuclear blasts on radio, radar and satellites. The first missile was partially successful. The next went off-course and plunged into deep water, from which its nuclear warhead was never recovered. The third

blew up immediately overhead, and falling debris injured two workers on the atoll. The fourth exploded in space and caused a brilliant artificial aurora that was seen from Alaska to Antarctica. Many people thought it was the end of the world." The atmospheric test resulted in the release of plutonium at Johnston, which is a half mile wide by two miles long.

According to "Mr. D.," a defense industry source knowledgeable about JACADS, speaking on condition of anonymity, a nuke "went off the launch pad and cracked ... The missile did not go off, but it cracked the casing, releasing plutonium." The radioactive area, he said, is "still off-limits via a chain link fence." In what amounts to the world's first and largest plutonium mining project, the U.S. is spending \$10 million to separate contaminated soil at the atomic atoll.

Plutonium is not the only lethal substance to leak into Johnston. In the 1970s, the U.S. shipped to the atoll millions of gallons of dioxin-contaminated Agent Orange, the birth defect-causing defoliant used in Vietnam. According to Mr. D., "The Agent Orange was stored in 55-gallon drums, which rusted, and the Agent Orange leaked into the soil." This still-contaminated area is also fenced off. According to Wilkes, the herbicide was finally burned in 1976 on the Vulcanus II incinerator ship, which he calls "notoriously inefficient." He adds, "Here, to an extreme degree, the U.S. military does anything that is too unpopular, too dangerous and too secret to do elsewhere in the Pacific."

The poisonous atoll had drawn the attention of Greenpeace Pacific coordinator Sebia Hawkins, who comments, "I have to believe there are inherent flaws with the JACADS design. Johnston is one of the most contaminated places on Earth."

But despite acknowledging the many spills and shutdowns, both the federal government and the defense industry firmly support the Johnston Atoll base. John Fairbanks of the Army's Public Affairs Office at Fort Shafter, Hawaii, asserts, "JACADS proves beyond a doubt you can safely, environmentally destroy chemical weapons. There's never been any violation of safety procedures." Pro-JACADS sources cite a noble cause: ridding the world of terrible weapons of mass destruction.

Alternative technologies could dispose of the chemical weapons more efficiently and cheaply even at the sites where they are stored, charges CWWG's Williams, who is also national spokesman for KEE. Why is a Kentuckian so concerned about distant Johnston Island? Four miles from Williams' home, in Lexington, Kentucky, the Army stockpiles 1.6 percent of the U.S. chemical arsenal. (The federal stockpile is scattered among eight states, and JACADS-like facilities are possible in all of them. Only one plant is actually under construction in the continental U.S., in Tooele, Utah, home of 42.3 percent of the stockpile. The facility is troubled and has been the subject of several critical stories.)

- Since the states have - unlike Johnston - resident populations, community protests in the 1980s forced the U.S. government to postpone construction of any incinerators. Instead, the process was relocated to Johnston, which, Williams asserts, was supposed to be a "showcase to prove it can be done." With growing calls for an independent investigation of JACADS, the "showcase" is blowing up in its supporters' faces.

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