

A Message from the Most Bombed Nation on Earth

Over 900 nuclear bomb tests were conducted on Shoshone territory in the US. Residents still live with the consequences.

By Ian Zabarte

Editor's note: In May, President Trump considered resuming nuclear weapons testing during a discussion with senior national security officials. Resumed testing would mean US rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and give other countries political reasons for their own resumption of weapons testing. Even the open threat of new tests denies and ignores the devastating and ongoing health and environmental effects of radioactive bomb test fallout suffered by the people of the Pacific islands, Canada, the United States, and its territories, in particular indigenous Shoshone and Marshall Islanders.

You never know what is killing you when it is done in secret.

I watched my uncle suffer from horrible cancer that ate away at his throat and my grandfather die of an auto-immune disease that is known to be caused by exposure to radiation. They say he had a heart attack, but when your skin falls off, that puts stress on your heart.

Many of my cousins have died. Last year, my cousin, who is about 50, had a defibrillator put in his chest. Now his daughter, who is a toddler, has heart problems as well. At around the same time, one of my cousins told me his mom has cancer. And then a week later, he found out he has it, too.

A few months ago, an elder here died from a rare form of brain cancer.

Every family is affected. We have seen mental and physical retardation, leukemia, childhood leukemia, all sorts of cancers.

The US military industrial complex

I am the Principal Man of the Western Bands of the Shoshone Nation of Indians—the most bombed nation on earth.

Our country is approximately 40,000 square miles (25.6 million acres), from just west of Las Vegas, Nevada all the way to the Snake River in Idaho, including a 350-mile (563km) wide strip in the Great Basin. There are approximately 25,000 to 30,000 Shoshone lineal descendants but the United States places the number much lower based on blood quantum (a percentage of ancestry).

We have been on this land for at least 10,000 years.

Our relationship to the US is based upon the Treaty of Ruby Valley signed in 1863. In the treaty, the Shoshone continue to own the land but we agreed that in exchange for \$5,000 a year for 20 years, paid in cattle and other goods, the US could establish military posts on the land, that US mail and telegraph companies could continue to operate telegraph and stage lines on it, that a railway could pass through it, that the US could mine for minerals on it.

But shortly before the end of World War II, we started to be overrun by the US military industrial complex, in ways we are only now beginning to understand.

Nuclear fallout

In 1951, in violation of the treaty, the US established the Nevada Proving Grounds (later called the Nevada Test Site, and now known as the Nevada National Security Site) on Shoshone territory, and began testing nuclear weapons—without our knowledge or consent. We suspect that Nazi scientists brought to the US as part of Operation Paperclip—to help the



The Nevada Test Site, above, is pockmarked with craters left by atmospheric and underground nuclear weapons test explosions. The Santa Fe *New Mexican* reports that a study by the National Cancer Institute has found that “as many as 1,000 New Mexicans living in communities near Trinity Site, where the first atomic bomb was detonated 75 years ago, might have developed cancer from the radioactive fallout.” The institutes’s findings were based on a six-year study. An October 1997 NCI investigation found that up to 15,000 thyroid cancers in the United States may have resulted from just the iodine-131 in the fallout from above-ground bomb tests that contaminated the US milk supply. Photo credit: Los Alamos National Laboratory/Science Photo Library.

US develop nuclear weapons—were involved. On January 27, 1951, the first nuclear test took place on our land, when a one-kiloton bomb was dropped from a plane flying over the site.

Over the next 40 years, it became the premier testing location for American nuclear weapons. Approximately 928 nuclear tests took place on the Shoshone territory—100 in the atmosphere and more than 800 underground.

When the US dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945, 13 kilotons of nuclear fallout rained down on the Japanese city. According to a 2009 study in the Nevada Law Journal, between 1951 and 1992, the tests conducted on our land caused 620 kilotons of nuclear fallout.

I was born in 1964 a year after above-ground testing of nuclear weapons was banned. But the US continued to test weapons of mass destruction under our land almost every three weeks until 1992.

The downwinders

The fallout from these tests covered a wide area, but it was Native American communities living downwind from the site who were most exposed—because we consumed contaminated wildlife, drank contaminated milk, lived off contaminated land. For Native American adults, the risk of exposure has been shown to be 15 times greater than for other Americans, for young people that increases to 30 times and for babies in utero to two years of age it can be as much as 50 times greater.

When the fallout came down, it killed the delicate flora and fauna, creating these huge vulnerabilities across thousands of square miles of Shoshone territory. The pine trees we use for food and heating were exposed; the plants we use for food and medicine were exposed; the animals we use for food were exposed. We were exposed.

As a result, we have watched our people die. Some of the strongest defenders of our land, of our people, are just gone.

But we have to protect our land and our people. Our identity is the land. Our identity is the pure, pristine water coming out of the ground, flowing for millions, tens of millions, hundreds of millions of years. We see that pure water as a medicine. People need that pure water to heal.

But what we find is that we have the US brokering for the nuclear industry, brokering for the mining in-

dustry, and the destruction of our property for profit. We cannot endure any further risk, whether from nuclear weapons testing or coal ash or oil tracking, any radiation sources at all.

Hammers and nails

We are beginning to understand what has happened to us. For more than 50 years, we have been suffering from this silent killer and the US government’s culture of secrecy keeps it silent. But we need relief.

In every other part of the world where there have been nuclear catastrophes or nuclear testing—such as Kazakhstan, Japan, even Chernobyl—there are health registries to monitor those who have been exposed, even if the numbers are kept artificially low in some places. We do not have that here in the US. We do not have that for Native American downwinders. We need that kind of testing. We need health registries. We need monitoring. We cannot wait any longer for the health disparities we are experiencing to be identified.

We have to fight the US to get it to understand our basic health needs.

We have managed to obtain documents that were declassified in the 1990s. But there are almost two million pages. Trying to understand all of that is daunting. We do not have any funding and we do not have the support of the US to get that work done. So we have to do this ourselves, as we suffer through this continuing health crisis.

And all the while, military activities are still being conducted on our land.

We continue to endure and we live with the understanding that the radiation is there on the ground; it is there in our plants, in our animals, and inside of our people.

Killing Shoshone people was never part of the treaty we signed. Our people would never have engaged in something that would result in our own destruction.

Our custom is sharing, but when all you have is a hammer, everything is a nail, and that is what the US military has been doing—hammering the Shoshone with bombs.

—Ian Zabarte is Principal Man of the Western Bands of the Shoshone Nation of Indians, and wrote this piece for Al Jazeera.