

Fukushima at Ten

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analyzed particles that were taken from surface soils collected 3.9 kilometers from the reactor site.

Speaking with *Science Daily* February 17, Dr. Utsunomiya said, “Owing to their large size, the health effects of the new particles are likely limited to external radiation hazards during static contact with skin.” The particles were reportedly spewed by the hydrogen explosions that rocked the reactor buildings and fell within a narrow zone that stretches approximately eight kilometers north-northwest of the meltdowns.

But Dr. Utsunomiya also said the long-lived radioactivity of cesium in “the newly found highly radioactive particles has not yet decayed significantly. As such, they will remain in the environment for many decades to come, and this type of particle could occasionally still be found in radiation hot spots.”

Smaller radioactive particles of uranium, thorium, radium, cesium, strontium, polonium, tellurium and americium were found afloat throughout Northern Japan, according to a report by Arnie Gundersen and Marco Kaltofen published July 27, 2017 in *Science of the Total Environment*. The radioactively hot particles were found in dusts and soils. About 180 particulate matter samples were taken from automobile or home air filters, outdoor surface dust, and vacuum cleaner bags. Some 142 of the samples (about 80 percent) contained cesium-134 and cesium-137 which emit intense beta radiation and is very dangerous if ingested or inhaled. “A majority

of these samples were collected from locations in decontaminated zones cleared for habitation by the National Government of Japan,” the authors revealed.

Greenpeace Reports Cleanup Failures and Deception

Greenpeace Japan released two major reports March 4 that also contradict the country’s positive decontamination and human rights claims after 2011.

“Successive governments during the last 10 years ... have attempted to perpetrate a myth about the nuclear disaster. They have sought to deceive the Japanese people by misrepresenting the effectiveness of the decontamination program and ignoring radiological risks,” said Shaun Burnie, Senior Nuclear Specialist at Greenpeace East Asia and co-author of the first report.

Key findings of the radiation report *Fukushima 2011-2020* are:

- Most of the 840 square kilometer Special Decontamination Area (SDA), where the government is responsible for decontamination, remains contaminated with radioactive cesium. ... an overall average of only 15% has been decontaminated.
- No long-term decontamination target level will be achieved in many areas. Citizens will be subjected for decades to radiation exposures in excess of the ... recommended maximum.



A Reuters image of a Fukushima reactor in ruins following three hydrogen gas explosions that were in turn brought on by meltdowns inside three reactors.

- In the areas where evacuation orders were lifted in 2017, specifically Namie and Iitate, radiation levels remain above safe limits, potentially exposing the population to increased cancer risk.

Key findings of *The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station* decommissioning report are:

- The current decommissioning plan in the time-frame of 30-40 years is impossible to achieve and is illusory.
- Radioactive waste created at the site should not be moved. Fukushima Daiichi is already and should remain a nuclear waste storage site for the long term.

Court Orders Veterans Affairs Department to Replace Flawed Science Used to Deny Benefits to Vets Poisoned in Plutonium Disaster

By John LaForge

In a major class action ruling issued Dec. 17, 2020, the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims in Washington, DC, has ordered the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to re-examine how it evaluates disability claims from veterans exposed to deadly alpha radiation during cleanup operations following a disastrous nuclear weapons accident at Palomares, Spain.

The ruling follows oral arguments made Sep. 2, 2020, and comes one year after the court’s historic decision to certify “class action” status for the veterans of the radioactive disaster response effort. The Veterans Legal Services Clinic of Yale Law School, which since 2016 has assisted in litigating the case, *Skaar v. Wilkie*, along with the New York Legal Assistance Group, announced the decision.

On Jan. 17, 1966, during an airborne refueling gone wrong, an Air Force B-52 bomber exploded over the village of Palomares. Seven crew members were killed and four hydrogen bombs were thrown to the Earth. Upon impact, conventional explosives inside two of the H-bombs detonated, blasting two giant craters and spreading as much as 22 pounds of highly radioactive, carcinogenic pulverized plutonium across the Spanish village and countryside. (See Dec. 18 report, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/12/18/air-force-veterans-of-plutonium-dust-disaster-win-class-action-standing>)

In its new decision, the court said the VA violated federal law requiring that its assessment of veterans’ radiation exposures be based on sound science. The VA has so far relied on faulty methods to deny disability benefits to veterans for radiation-related illnesses caused by the nuclear weapons disaster, the legal services clinic said, calling the decision “a long-awaited step toward recognizing the Palomares veterans’ service and ensuring they have access to the benefits they earned,” it said. Even a single particle of plutonium if inhaled or ingested can cause cancer.

The injured veterans’ lawsuit is led by Chief Master Sergeant Victor Skaar (USAF, Ret.) of Nixa, Missouri, who participated in the cleanup. Skaar and the class argue that the VA’s radiation exposure methodology “ignored 98 percent of the radiation measurements taken from veterans after the incident,” an error so grave that, “Dr. von Hippel and even the VA’s own consultant have faulted the method,” the law clinic said.



Air Force personnel worked where nuclear bomb explosions dispersed plutonium dust. Credit USAF

Skaar and at least 1,500 others were sent to clean up plutonium-contaminated debris and lived amidst the wreckage and the plutonium dust for weeks — handling it, cleaning it from clothes, washing it off of village surfaces, placing contaminated soil in barrels, and even incinerating truckloads of poisoned debris. Now, “many of the veterans have radiation-related illnesses that require medical treatment. Others have died from these conditions...” the law clinic said.

Referring to a December 2017 report by Princeton University physicist Frank von Hippel about 26 GIs who were identified in 1966 as having received the highest exposures, the court wrote: “Dr. von Hippel concluded that ‘The Air Force’s dose estimates have huge uncertainties and the maximum doses incurred by those not in the “High 26” could be hundreds of times higher than those that the Air Force has recommended to the VA for determination of benefits.’”

The court said further that the VA never explained why it adopted the flawed methodology. The court’s opinion, written by Judge Michael Allen, admonished the Board of Veterans’ Appeals declaring that it may not “abdicate its responsibility to assess whether the evidence before it is ‘sound.’” The court ordered the VA to review the parties’ evidence and provide considered analysis of the methodology to ensure that only sound scientific evidence is used to determine veterans’ eligibility for disability benefits.

John Rowan, Air Force Veteran and National President of Vietnam Veterans of America said in a statement, “Thanks to the court’s decision and the continuing advocacy of Mr. Skaar and other class members, the VA must now justify its practice of arbitrarily dismissing the exceedingly high levels of radiation these veterans encountered and continue to suffer from ... [and] fulfill its duty under law to assist these veterans and ensure their claims are evaluated using methods that are both scientifically and legally sound.”

Startlingly, the Air Force has never included the weeks-long Palomares plutonium cleanup on its list of “radiation risk activities” which it uses to rule on disability claims, in spite of its own 1967 finding that service members’ “health is in no jeopardy from retention of radioactive materials as a result of participation in the [Palomares] operation.” Asked how the Air Force can keep such an admittedly radiation-heavy cleanup operation off the list, the law clinic’s Molly Petchnik told me the list was drawn up long ago and the military is reluctant to expand it.

The official list in the Code of Federal Regulations recognizes only four service-related radiation risk areas since 1966, including work at nuclear weapon production sites in Paducah, Kent.; Portsmouth, Ohio; and Oak Ridge, Tenn. in 1991; and on Amchitka Island, Alaska in 1974, involving underground hydrogen bomb tests.