

Network ‘Sortir du Nucléaire’ *

An alliance of 930 associations
accredited as an environmental
protection organisation
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To:

Mme Nicole BRICQ,
Minister of Foreign Trade

M. Pascal CANFIN,
Junior Minister for Development

M. Laurent FABIUS,
Minister of Foreign Affairs

M. Philippe MARTIN,
Minister of Ecology, Energy and Sustainable Development

Copies to:

M. Michel DOUCIN,
Ambassador for Bioethics and Corporate Social Responsibility

M. Michel ROCARD
Ambassador in charge of the international negotiations for Polar regions

M. Philippe ZELLER,
French Ambassador to Canada

Re: A warning about the risks of an Areva mining project in Nunavut

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In this letter, which has the support of more than 30,000 signatories, the French antinuclear network ‘Sortir du Nucléaire’, an alliance of 930 French organisations and 59,000 individual members, would like to draw your attention to, and highlight the risks

* Translates as ‘phasing out nuclear power’

associated with, the Areva mining projects in Nunavut, the largest territory of Northern Canada, which is principally inhabited by the Inuit people.

The problems created by the setting up of uranium mines will most certainly not be unknown to you: contamination of soil and water for thousands of years; serious health impacts for local populations and miners; frequent violations of human rights etc. In addition to radioactive dust and radon emissions, the extraction of uranium and the processing of the ore generate a great deal of waste ('tailings' or mine dumps, radioactive sludge etc...) that pollutes the surrounding atmosphere and water resources. Moreover, the whole process consumes enormous amounts of water and uses up the local reserves. In addition to major and lasting impacts on the health of the populations concerned, uranium mining also means the devastation of territories, and robbing local people of their resources and means of survival.

There are many examples which dramatically illustrate this kind of devastation. In the Arlit region of northern Niger, Areva is directly responsible for the pollution of soil, rivers, and the atmosphere, as well as the depletion of (non-renewable) fossil groundwater aquifers. Investigations by CRIIRAD have revealed the amount of waste and radioactive scrap left abandoned by the company. In addition to suffering poor working conditions, miners are not adequately protected against radioactivity.¹ What is more, the presence of Areva and French interests in Arlit offers a depressing reminder of French neocolonialism, where people are being evicted from their lands without receiving any of the benefits from the wealth generated by the mining companies who have displaced them. France's supposed 'energy self-sufficiency' seems a long way away ...

In Gabon, the old Mounana mine has continued to cause pollution even after its closure in 1999. In spite of rehabilitation, former mining areas remain contaminated for generations and the waste that was discharged into lakes or reused as building materials, exposes people to unacceptable doses of radioactivity.²

France itself, where 186 mining sites were operated during the second half of the 20th century, provides an example of the impossibility of managing this radioactive legacy. The 300 million tons of waste generated (mainly tailings and radioactive sludge) were often abandoned in open countryside, frequently without adequate warning signs ... and that was when they were not being used to build foundations for roads or car-parks. In some of these car-parks, the public can be exposed to more than 100 times the natural dose of background radiation!

Therefore, we are appealing to you to make sure that Nunavut and the Inuit do not, in their turn, become victims of a similarly unmanageable situation. As things stand, Areva is planning to create near the small town of Baker Lake: four open-cast mines; one underground mine; ore processing facilities; an airfield; a winter track; and possibly a

¹ *Left in the dust ; AREVA's radioactive legacy in the desert towns of Niger.* Report by Greenpeace International published in April 2010.

² *The Impacts of mining on local populations and the environment in Haut-Ogooué.* Report by the NGO Brainforest published in August 2010.

road that will be passable at all times of the year. With the terrible health and environmental consequences already mentioned, we foresee disaster ahead for this vulnerable area.

Moreover, if this mining complex goes ahead, it would be accompanied by the construction of major infrastructure that would have a significant impact in an area that has already been weakened by climate change, and would disturb the native wildlife that is essential for the survival of the Inuit. This first phase of development would pave the way for uranium mining throughout Nunavut and the creation of many other mines, which would radically transform the entire territory.

It will also involve the permanent storage of radioactive waste in the permafrost of the tundra, the stability of which, according to the most credible climate models, appears to be seriously threatened by future changes in climate. Finally, the Kiggavik mine would be operating in a region where the blizzards in the Canadian Arctic are among the most violent in the world, which raises fears of the spread of radioactive dust as well as serious concerns about Areva's ability to respond in the event of an accident.

We should also like to draw your attention to what Areva have already been doing in Nunavut, of which we were informed by Makitagunarningit Nunavummiut (known as 'Makita'),³ the only environmental NGO in the territory. According to Makita, the decision-making process is flawed because Areva is attempting to influence the outcome in their favour, while concealing information from the public about the real impacts of uranium mining.

Previously, in 1990, the Inuit population voted by plebiscite against a mining project being proposed by the Urangesellschaft company (which was later acquired by Cogema/Areva in 1992). After the creation of Nunavut as a territory in 1999, the decision was taken that "any proposal to mine uranium must be approved by the people of the region." But in 2008, the same year that Areva introduced its proposal for mining in the area, the authorities suddenly declared that "the people of the region" were in favour of extraction, even though no public vote had been held and there had been no public consultation. Faced with this unjustified reversal of policy, Makita demanded that the Government of Nunavut launch a public inquiry and arrange a referendum.

In fact, in 2011, instead of a public inquiry, the Government of Nunavut organised a 'public forum' which took the form of a series of 'consultation' meetings with the public, which had no remit to discuss opposition to the extraction of uranium. At these forums, all the background information was provided by Golder Associates, a consulting firm that had been hired by Urangesellschaft and Areva to help them to prepare their proposals. In the course of these meetings, the Government of Nunavut reaffirmed its support for the uranium mining project. The review of Areva's proposal, limited to the specifics of the project, is ongoing. The individuals responsible for this technocratic process are not empowered to hold a public vote or respond in any manner whatsoever to the questions and objections raised locally. Nothing is done to enable people to gain access to

³ See the Makita website: <http://makitanunavut.wordpress.com/>

information about the project: key documents are not translated into Inuktitut (the Inuit language), and important meetings are held to coincide with Inuit hunting seasons.

Meanwhile, Areva is running an intensive public relations campaign. It organises meetings with the public to promote the project, giving away hats, t-shirts and even laptop computers. The message being driven home by Areva is that the extraction of uranium will help to stop climate change, which is a fallacious argument, but one that strikes a definite chord in Nunavut, where changes in climate are occurring much faster than anywhere else in the world.

In April 2013, Makita made a submission to the study on extractive and energy industries in and near indigenous territories being conducted by the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Makita pointed out that the Inuit people as a whole had not yet given their free and informed consent on the issue of uranium mining in the area. The submission repeated Makita's call for a public inquiry and a public ballot on the question of uranium mining in Nunavut.

The French network 'Sortir du nucléaire', in solidarity with the struggle of the Inuit people, condemns Areva's manipulation of the situation and **demands the immediate abandonment of this project** which threatens to devastate the Inuit lands and plunge **an entire population into a health, ecological and economic disaster**. France's 'energy imperialism' over these indigenous peoples is outrageous and criminal and our country must urgently put an end to such behaviour which has gone on for far too long! How many lives and territories must carry on being sacrificed for the sake of a dangerous, outmoded and polluting source of energy?

We urge the French government, the majority shareholder in the multinational Areva, to respect its international commitments on human rights which are incompatible with such projects, and in particular the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We should also like to remind the French government of Convention No. 169 of the International Labour Organisation which France would be well advised to ratify, in terms of its importance to the rights of indigenous peoples (cf. Article 15.2)
(See Appendix)

Therefore we request a meeting with you to talk about this issue as soon as possible.

Looking forward your response.

Yours sincerely,

Network 'Sortir du Nucléaire'

APPENDIX

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

Article 32.2: States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free and informed consent prior to the approval of any project affecting their lands or territories and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilization or exploitation of mineral, water or other resources.

International Labour Organisation Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples:

Article 15.2: In cases in which the State retains the ownership of mineral or sub-surface resources or rights to other resources pertaining to lands, governments shall establish or maintain procedures through which they shall consult these peoples, with a view to ascertaining whether and to what degree their interests would be prejudiced, before undertaking or permitting any programmes for the exploration or exploitation of such resources pertaining to their lands. The peoples concerned shall wherever possible participate in the benefits of such activities, and shall receive fair compensation for any damages which they may sustain as a result of such activities.