**IPAN-Victoria – July 4 Public Forum – Keep Australia Out of U.S. wars**

**Talk by Fiona McCandless**

Member of IPAN and unionist

I am by no means an expert in Australia’s involvement in American militarism, however I do come from a very strong unionist and peace activist family. My nanna, the late Pauline Mitchell was arguably one of the first people to reveal the building Pine Gap in the 50s while she was a journalist for a local paper in Alice Springs. My mother and I have attended an anti nuclear weapon conference in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and I was fortunate enough to attend the Socialist-leaning World Festival for Youth and Students in Russia in 2017.

I may not have much specialist knowledge of American bases and American influence in Australia, however I do have a somewhat morbid interest in the devastating effects of nuclear weapons, and a bad habit of googling the history of the British nuclear testing on our land. I also have an academic background in Japanese cultural studies, and will also speak briefly about the state of Okinawa – a prefecture that understands first hand the insecurity and fear that comes with US military bases. The overarching theme of my talk is that no matter which country is the occupier or the occupied, the host country loses their sovereignty when we open our land to foreign military, and often the main sufferers of the military presence are the indigenous people.

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The first time I came in ‘contact’ with US militarism was during a holiday to Okinawa, Japan. At university I studied anthropology with a focus on Japan, and spent a year there on exchange. My friends and I went on a beachside holiday to Okinawa that happened to coincide with military activity in the area to put pressure on North Korea. Every morning over breakfast these slick black American fighter jets zoomed overhead, and I remember them being so loud. This was in 2010 – a year where the US bases in Okinawa expanded despite constant protests from locals. The Japanese government have their hands somewhat tied on the matter, and even the Okinawan prefectural government has difficulty pushing back against America. The largest protest in Okinawan history was in 1995 when US soldiers raped a 12-year-old local girl. The second largest protests were in 2004 where a military helicopter from Futenma base crashed into neighbouring Okinawa International University. // Despite the university being on ‘Japanese’ land, not American, the US Special Forces shut down the university, confiscating any recorded material of the crash and limiting Japanese police activity. Parts of the helicopter damaged around 17 houses and around 30 vehicles, and yet local police could not investigate the scene. Astonishingly, there were no casualties but a handful of injuries. The secrecy of this crash has lead to speculation on what exactly the helicopter was carrying to prevent local a clean up of the Okinawan university. Last year another piece of debris fell from a military helicopter, landing on a primary school in Futenma. The Okinawan people have little voice or integrity in the happenings on their own land, and are time and again taken advantage of by the American soldiers stationed there.

 At Tokyo university we had foreign ex diplomats take host lectures telling us that Australia and Japan were America’s biggest influence in East Asia which was vital to ‘keep an eye’ on China, North Korea and East Russia. This was pitched to us as though Australia and Japan should be proud of our close relations with the US. My visit to Okinawa showed me the complete opposite, where a very friendly but ostracised culture of people were being ‘used’ for the US military. The military bases were hidden by huge concrete walls, you can’t view them on Google maps or Google Earth, we met with US student teachers who had little respect for the local culture, and the locals get woken by the roar of planes every morning. This is the everyday reality for those living in Okinawa. There is no safety that comes with opening your land to the American military and its bases.

For a long time Okinawa was considered one of the most dangerous places in the world given its close proximity to North Korea and China coupled with the military bases. It is holds around 75% of all American bases in Japan, estimated at 26,000 Americans. There are so many bases in Okinawa and the American presence is so strong that I found it overwhelming. The newest base in Okinawa is planned for Henoko, moving the current base in Futenma after over a decade of protesting. Henoko is a lesser-populated are than Futenma, but the base will destroy the delicate marine and coral life around the island. The Okinawans are arguing that they don’t want this base relocated, they want it shut down.

Okinawa itself is slightly ostracized from the main islands of Japan – the Okinawan or Ryukyuan (リュキュアン) people are an indigenous people of the islands between ‘mainland’ Japan and Taiwan, with their own dialects and their own cultural traits. Due to Japan’s ‘dedication’ to homogeneity, they are not officially recognised as a minority peoples by the Japanese government, but the Ryukyuan people make up around 1.3 million of Okinawas 1.45 million population. This is an important point, as there seems to be a trend with colonialist militarism – it's a literal and metaphoric rape of the indigenous people for the benefit of an ever-growing foreign military. If you let in the US bases, you lose your sovereignty.

Now to segue the topic on to Maralinga, and the British nuclear testing on our Indigenous lands, and similarly to the case in Japan, the lack of information shared between the UK, Australian Government, and our First Peoples.

In the wild early years of the Cold War, Menzies agreed to allow British nuclear testing in Australia to ensure strong Anglo-Australian ties. A total of 12 nuclear explosion tests were conducted on our land, along with countless minor trials of radioactive material, testing the performance and safety mechanisms of nuclear weapons. Three bombs were detonated by boat and by air on Montebello islands off the WA coast. // One of these bombs, known as ‘G2’ was over 6 times larger in TNT yield than the ‘Little Boy’ bomb dropped in Hiroshima. The fallout was larger than expected, and there are reports that this fallout reached as far as Rockhampton in Queensland. /discuss slides – black = glass shatter, Orange = 3rd degree burns, Black = building damage, Green = severe radiation (death within weeks)/ The islands are now a marine park and though the Australian Government has deemed the cleanup as adequate and the area safe, the Western Australia Marine Parks brochure recommends to not disturb the soil in the areas near the bomb sites, and to limit your visit to one hour per day. // I feel that there may be different interpretations on the definition of ‘safe’ when it comes to decommissioned nuclear test zones.

Maralinga and Emu Field held 9 nuclear explosions, and an estimate of around 700 minor tests, some of these tests had the cute codenames: ‘Vixen’ ‘Kitten’, ‘Tims’ and ‘Rats’. Some of these tests used radioactive plutonium that, in the case of Taranaki site in Maralinga, have a half-life of around 24,000 years and was dispersed over a distance of around 450km. A cleanup ‘Operation Brumby’ was undertaken by the British Government in 1967, but was severely inadequate, involving turning the top soil in an aim to dilute the radioactive dust, and radioactive material such as metals from the site were buried in 22 concrete-topped pits. People such as the late Maralinga elder and activist Yami Lester, blinded by the nuclear tests, and Avon Hudson - RAAF serviceman at ground zero during the nuclear tests who released Commonwealth secrets of the happenings at Maralinga and told the media of the inadequacies of the cleanup, causing public outcry. This activism sparked the Royal Commission in 1985 into the British Nuclear Test sites of Australia, and their findings were very critical of the Menzies and British Government, the clean up attempt by Operation Brumby, and the complete lack of regard or concern for the Indigenous land-owners and Australian participants in the tests.

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The 1985 Royal Commission into the British Nuclear Tests in Australia found that Menzies approved the testing without any Australian scientific advisors or independent advice on the effects of the land and humans. Even the federal cabinet were kept in the dark by Menzies on the nature of the tests, agreements on the nuclear testing were signed off in Parliament after the first tests had been conducted, and the primary advisor to oversee the testing was a British ex-pat who was found to be withholding information from our Government. This is apparent during the tests too, where Australian soldiers and workmen were not provided the same safety equipment as the British, they were told to fly planes through plumes of radioactive fallout, and as a result have an estimated 23% higher rate of cancer.

Adding salt to the wound, and showing that government good-intentions and bureaucratic head-nodding does little to help those living near Maralinga – the second clean up operation, organised by Australia had the aim to clean the area enough to allow the Maralinga Tjarutja (Jaruja) people to return to their land. The cleanup operation involved basically scraping top soil and excavating that what was already buried and transporting the radioactive material to trenches for re-burial.

The cleaning of the Taranaki site – the area most contaminated by the minor testing of plutonium – was almost comical in its execution. The aim was to sweep up the 330,000 cubic meters of topsoil home to 3.3kg of plutonium, which they used three scrapers and a bulldozer to do so. In the beginning of the cleanup they had not considered that the Australian desert is a bit dusty. // On 15 occasions the cleanup was stopped due to bad visibility from radioactive dust being thrown into the air, or blown by the wind. There area also some studies showing that due to this ‘cleanup’, contaminated soil was carried by the wind to aboriginal communities 120km away, upping their dose of radiation to the same levels as those evacuating from the Fukushima reactor meltdown.

// Once the soil was contained, it was buried in a 15 meter deep trench, covered with around 6 meters of clean soil, then sprinkled with seeds to complete the re-vegitation process.

The original concrete-capped pits created by Operation Brumby were uncovered, but they found that the concrete lids did not cover the whole pits, with some lids found several meters from the pits altogether. The amount of plutonium in the pits was far greater than what was reported in the Royal Commission, and the original plan to clean up these plutonium pits was eventually discarded due to cost.

The original plan was to complete an ‘in-situ vitrification’ – using electricity to melt the plutonium and soil into glass in an aim to contain the radioactive material. Some of the pits had successfully been melted down, but in the 13th pit an unexpected explosion occurred, sending the plutonium glass in a 50 meter radius from the pit, and damaging the machinery.

With the costs now higher than what was originally budgeted, and the project having unexpected explodings, the Howard government sold the project to a private company Gutteridge Haskings and Davey (GHD), who were appointed as project manager and project authority. Reports from the original project team went back to the Department stating that GHD had no background experience in the three year planning of the Maralinga cleaning task, they had no knowledge of the technology, and hadn’t even seen the clean-up equipment. The Department ignored this information, but instead signed off on a submission by GHD to cut costs on the project and to allow a hybrid plan not agreed on by the South Australian or Aboriginal consultative groups.

The remaining waste was buried in a shallow soil pit not sealed by any concrete as is the minimum requirement in the USA and UK, but covered by a mere 2 meters of soil. The Australian Government states that this cleanup exceeds the world’s best standards. To compare, in Britain the process of disposing of radioactive plutonium is to place the radioactive material in steel drums, which are in turn placed on a concrete base and then placed in a guarded, air- conditioned facility. Despite this, in November 2014 the 1,782 square kilometers of test site was handed back to the Maralinga Tjarutja people, however, for a small safety measure, the 400 square km of the Taranaki Maralinga site is not recommended to inhabit, only to pass through. //

This is a major issue for the Maralinga Tjarutja, who often don’t wear shoes while walking on contaminated land. The Australian government finally paid 13.5 million dollars in compensation to the 1,800 Maralinga Tjarutja people affected by the testing, but the full effects of the radiation for our first nations people of the area is difficult to guage, with the onus of ‘proof’ of injury up to the individual who in the case of outback South Australia, often don’t have medical records. Indigenous activists, many of who have passed away, were blinded by the fallout or ‘black mist’ of the tests, and experienced nausea, and burning skin. Many died after the blasts as their water sources had been contaminated. It was the job of the Briton Walter Donald to communicate the dangers of nuclear testing to the Maralinga Tjarutja people living in the area, however the Milpuddy family were found camping by the base of the crater mere months after the testing. The Chief Scientist to the Commonwealth Department of Supply during the testing stated in a letter to his manager, that; “he is apparently placing the affairs of a handful of natives above those of the British Commonwealth of Nations”. After the horrific, botched job of Maralinga and the British nuclear testing in Australia, there is not enough monetary compensation we can provide for the complete disregard Britain and Australia have had on our First Nation’s People, and their continued suffering. //

There is extensive danger and loss of life when we open our country to foreign military powers. We saw the dangers of this in the 50s and 60s with British nuclear testing, and Japan are still battling for sovereignty with the extensive bases in Okinawa. Bases used for weapons testing, for intelligence or data storage as is the case with Pine Gap, or for military training, are all against a country’s sovereignty. We are a great country and our passive involvement in US military through opening our land to their war-hungry plans does not benefit us and as the Japanese and Maralinga examples show, quickly become a hot-bed of secrecy, lies, and advantageous use of our land for the perpetuation of death at home and abroad.

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Engeneers Australia Nuclear Cleanup