

The Ecologist

May/June 1997

CAMPAIGNS & UPDATES

Nuclear Proliferation in Space

In October this year, the US space agency, NASA, is planning to launch a plutonium-powered space probe to Saturn. The trajectory of the probe — called Cassini — requires it to graze the earth's atmosphere in August 1999, just 312 miles above the earth's surface. Should Cassini accidentally come in just slightly closer in this fly-by, the probe and its fuel could burn up, dispersing plutonium across the planet.

The 72.3 pounds of plutonium-238 aboard Cassini, the largest amount of plutonium ever sent into space, is not to be used for propulsion — that will be done by a chemically-fuelled rocket — but for powering generators to produce 745 watts of electricity to run the probe's instruments — a task that could more easily, efficiently and safely be accomplished by solar cells. Plutonium-238 has a half life of 87.8 years and is some 280 times more radioactive than weapons grade plutonium-239, which has a half life of 24,500 years.

Plutonium has long been described by scientists as the most toxic known substance; less than one-millionth of a gramme is a carcinogenic dose. Says Dr Helen Caldicott, founder of Physicians for Social Responsibility, "one pound [of plutonium], if uniformly distributed, could hypothetically induce lung cancer in every person on earth."

NASA's environmental impact statement estimates that if an "inadvertent re-entry occurred" during the fly-by, approximately five billion of the seven to eight billion people on earth "could receive 99 per cent or more of the radiation exposure". Dr Michio Kaku, Professor of nuclear physics at the City University of New York, says that pulverized plutonium dust "will rain down on people's hair, people's clothing, get into people's bodies."

NASA estimates the potential death toll — labelled as "health effects" — at

just 2,300 people over a 50-year period, and points out that "latent cancer fatalities" would probably be "statistically indistinguishable from normally occurring cancer fatalities among the world population."

Other scientists calculate that NASA has underestimated the cancer risk by 2,000 to 4,000 times, and has not taken into account other causes of death, such as heart disease and immune deficiencies, bringing the actual death toll to 30 to 40 million people.

In November 1996, a Russian Mars space probe accidentally nose-dived back to earth, falling over Chile and Bolivia; it is uncertain whether the canisters containing half a pound of plutonium were destroyed coming through the atmosphere, dispersing the plutonium, or whether they survived and hit the earth.

Environmental investigative reporter Karl Grossman suggests that NASA's insistence on using nuclear technology in space, despite the existence of alternatives, is connected with "the military potential of space". A 1993 White House policy statement asserted that "space nuclear power and propulsion systems can contribute to scientific, commercial and national security space missions." Says Dr Kaku:

"What we are headed for is a nuclear-propelled rocket with nuclear-propelled lasers in outer space . . . Ultimately what they would like to do is have nuclear-powered battle stations in outer space. That's what all of this is leading up to."

Concerned at the increasing potential for disaster, a worldwide coalition, The Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space, was formed in 1992 to challenge the use of nuclear power in space and to stop the militarization of outer space. Said one of the coalition's coordinators:

"The United States military and major

weapons corporations view space as a new market, ultimately to profit from. They are using taxpayers' dollars to put a new round of the arms race in space. At the same time, the nuclear power industry views space as its new market, a place where they can put plutonium and other radioactive sources."

WRITE TO your national and regional parliamentary representatives.

CONTACT: Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space, c/o Florida Coalition for Peace & Justice, Box 90035, Gainesville, FL 32607, USA. Tel: +1 (904) 468 3295; Karl Grossman, E-mail <kgrossman@hamptons.com>; To subscribe to the *Stop Cassini Newsletter*, E-mail <rhoffman@animatedsoftware.com> Website: <http://www.animatedsoftware.com/cassini/index.htm>

Yorkshire Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament are coordinating a postcard campaign to President Clinton. For copies, contact: Yorkshire CND, 22 Edmonds St, Bradford BD5 0BH, UK. Tel: 01274 730795; Fax: 01274 414413; E-mail <cndyork@gn.apc.org>

RESOURCES: A 53-minute video, *Nukes in Space: The Nuclearization and Weaponization of the Heavens*, \$19.95, EnviroVideo, Box 311, Ft. Tilden, NY 11695, USA. Tel: +1 (718) 318 7715; Fax: +1 (718) 318 8045; E-mail <envirovideo@earthlink.net>

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Mining Protests in Ecuador and PNG

Environmentalists in Ecuador have launched an international campaign to halt a mining project in the Intag-Imbabura forest of northwest Ecuador.

Two companies — Rio Tinto Zinc of the UK and Bishimetals of Japan, a subsidiary of Mitsubishi — are actively exploring the copper-rich area. No mining has yet taken place, but considerable environmental damage has already been caused by contamination of streams and construction of access roads.

Bishimetals and the state company, CODIGEM, plan to start opencast mining in the area soon. An environmental impact study, part of which has been obtained by local environmental group DECOIN, predicts a massive increase in deforestation, with potential impacts on the local climate.

The study, which has not been released to the public, also warns that 100 families from four Intag communities will have to be relocated.

WRITE, requesting that the project be suspended and that an adequate remedial plan of

action be implemented, to: Dr. Raul Baca Carbo, Minister of Energy and Mines, ECUADOR (Fax: +593 2 502 092) and the General Manager, Mitsubishi Materials Corporation, JAPAN (Fax: +352 525270).

• **The Melanesian Solidarity Group**, a Papua New Guinea-based NGO, has appealed for international support after its offices were raided by armed police in May. Three activists were arrested and charged with unlawful assembly for protesting against the use of British mercenaries, brought in by the PNG government to crush opposition to the Bougainville copper mine which is run by RTZ-CRA. The raid is part of a wider crackdown on the activities of NGOs in Papua New Guinea.

WRITE, condemning the raid and demanding that the government undertake not to suppress the work and role of NGOs, to: Hon. John Giheno, Acting Prime Minister, Office of the Prime Minister, PO Box 639 Waigani, National Capital District, PAPUA NEW GUINEA. Fax: +675 327 6540.

CONTACT: Minewatch, 54 Camberwell Rd, London SE5 0EN, UK. Tel: +44 (0)171-277 4852; Fax: +44 (0)171-277 4853; E-mail <minewatch@gm.apc.org>

Power Line Protest

Construction of a high-tension power line across the traditional lands of the Pemon Indians in Venezuela was delayed in May by protests by the Indians. The state-owned power company, CVG-EDELCA, and the National Parks Institute, INPARQUES, had failed to respond to the Pemon's request to be consulted on the project.

The Pemon are concerned that the power line, scheduled for completion in August 1998, will open up their lands in the south-east of Venezuela to mining and other extractive activities.

The power lines will also cross Venezuela's Canaima National Park, a World Heritage Site. Environmental groups have warned that the power lines will inflict considerable damage on the forest within the Park.

The failure of CVG-EDELCA and INPARQUES to consult Pemon is in breach of Venezuelan law. The Pemon have stated that, until consultations take place, they will continue to disrupt the project.

Temelín Nuclear Plant Under Siege

Activists are trying to prevent the upgrading this summer of the Russian Temelín nuclear power plant in the Czech Republic by US company Westinghouse with a non-violent blockade of the gates. They claim that the reactor will be upgraded with Western technology, but not to Western safety standards — the hybrid plants do not meet EU safety standards.

According to critics, Westinghouse views unfinished Russian nuclear power plants in the former Soviet Union as an

opportunity to regain a failing nuclear market. Indeed, the general director of the energy division of Westinghouse, Nathaniel Woodson, said, "Temelín nuclear power plant is not, in itself, very important. We believe, however, that with its help we will conclude other deals in the field of nuclear energy in Eastern Europe."

Critics also charge that Westinghouse seems to have bribed the Czech energy utility, CEZ, to disclose competing bids before Westinghouse was awarded the upgrading contract

Energy efficiency reports conducted by the World Bank and EBRD have determined that energy efficiency measures in the country would be cheaper than building the nuclear power plant and could exceed Temelín's production capacity. The Czech government, CEZ and Westinghouse all refuse to allow public access to the environmental impact and safety analysis of Temelín.

CONTACT: PIANO, Chvalova 3/1105, 130 00 Praha 3, CZECH REPUBLIC. Tel: +42-2-9003 1895; E-mail <piano@ecn.cz>

New UN Rules on Forced Eviction

After two years of deliberations, the United Nations adopted far-reaching new standards on forced evictions in May.

The new rules stipulate that member states "must refrain from forced evictions and ensure that the law is enforced against its agents or third parties who carry out forced evictions."

The rules also break new ground by

stating that "evictions should not result in rendering individuals homeless or vulnerable to the violation of other human rights". In future, governments will therefore be obliged to ensure alternative housing for those evicted.

The standards have been welcomed by human rights groups "as a milestone in global efforts against forced evictions".

According to the Geneva-based Centre

on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), more than ten million people are currently threatened with forced eviction. In Nigeria alone, more than 1.2 million living in the capital, Lagos, are scheduled to be evicted to make way for urban "improvements".

CONTACT: COHRE, 8 Rue Gustave Moynier, 1202 Geneva, SWITZERLAND. Tel/Fax: +41 22 738 8167. E-mail <cohre@itu.ch>

Thailand Threatened Over Intellectual Property Law

The United States has warned Thailand that a draft Bill aimed at recognizing and protecting traditional healers and medicinal genetic resources could be in violation of the Trade Related Intellectual Property (TRIPs) agreement of the WTO. The draft Bill had not been seen by the US government when the warning was issued.

The object of the Bill, drawn up in collaboration with NGOs, is to encourage the conservation and use of herbal plants and genetic resources. If it became law, those who register traditional knowledge of plants and remedies would have the right to benefits if their knowledge was used by commercial concerns. Such knowledge, however, could be used freely by the public.

Thai NGOs — representing farmers, ethnic communities, the urban poor and other sectors of civil society — have ac-

cused the US of political interference in Thailand's affairs and have forwarded their concerns to the Intergovernmental Commission on Genetic Resources.

The Thai government has also been urged to file a formal request to the TRIPs Council for clarification regarding the US interpretation of the WTO rules.

CONTACT: Working Group on Farmers' Rights, Genetic Resources and Traditional Medicine. E-mail <wittoon@wnet.net.th>. Fax: +66 2 952 8312.

• **The Ethyl Corporation of the US has filed a \$251 million lawsuit against the Canadian government for its ban in April this year of the import and inter-provincial transport of the petrol additive, MMT, which the Canadian authorities have deemed dangerously toxic.**

Ethyl claims that the Canadian ban on MMT violates the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); it is seeking compensation for the "expropriation" of

its MMT production plant and its "good reputation".

Ethyl is bringing the case under a provision of NAFTA which grants corporations "private legal standing" and permits them to sue on their own behalf where they are in dispute with signatory governments. The proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) includes a similar provision. In other trade agreements, only governments can bring suits.

If the courts rule in Ethyl's favour, the case could set a precedent whereby signatories to NAFTA would be forced to compensate companies affected by new public health or environmental regulations.

CONTACT: Preamble Centre for Public Policy, 1737 21st Street NW, Washington DC 20009, USA. Tel: +1 (202) 265 3263; Fax: +1 (202) 265 3647; E-mail <msforza@rtk.net>

Big Brother Wired to the "Grassroots"

Employees of large corporations in the US are coming under increasing pressure to join company-generated letter writing campaigns so as to stave off legislation that might prove harmful to corporate interests.

New technologies now enable companies not only to e-mail sample letters to thousands of their employees at the push of a button, but also to monitor how they respond. A flood of employee letters to government departments resembles "grassroots" activity.

A host of new computer programmes are enabling companies to build up databases on their employees and former employees. The databases are "enriched" with 9-digit zip codes and matching state and federal legislative districts, so that the company can identify each employee's state and federal legislators, along with his or her voter precinct.

Databases also keep track of employee telephone numbers, e-mail addresses and their history of political activity; they can be integrated to "campaign management software" which keeps a record of each individual's political lobbying on behalf of the company.

One programme — "Net Action", now

being marketed by a US-based Gnosso Software — enables companies to broadcast company-drafted specimen letters to all company employees via the company's internal e-mail system and to route employees' responses to the office of their individual legislators. The programme also generates a full list of employees who responded, facilitating monitoring of their political loyalty.

Pharmaceutical giant Merck and Co is using the information superhighway to mobilize a "Merck Action Network" of 8,800 company employees and retirees. Participants receive a quarterly "Grassroots Update" and "Action Alert" and participate in their industry-wide trade association lobbying network, the Health Care Leadership Council.

Merck recently generated 800 individual telephone calls to Congress lobbying for swifter approval of pharmaceutical drugs and gathered 80,000 names in a petition drive. One in six workers in the US is employed by a large corporation, nearly all of which are gearing up to "go grassroots".

CONTACT: Center for Media and Democracy, 3318 Gregory St, Madison, WI 53711, USA. Tel +1 (608) 233 3346; Fax: +1 (608) 238 2236; E-mail <74250.735@CompuServe.COM>

Asylum Fast

Fifteen asylum seekers in Britain, interned in Winson Green prison in Birmingham rather than in a detention centre, went on hunger strike for the month of May in protest at the conditions they are being kept under. All the detainees were moved to the punishment block, which they say is infested with cockroaches and other vermin.

They were usually locked up for 24 hours a day, allowed just one hour's association with other people each week and one shower per week.

In a letter written from the prison, the detainees pointed out that "If we were detained in China or Turkey or any other totalitarian country, we could understand the denial of our basic rights under the 1951 Geneva Convention to which Britain is a signatory. Somewhere we have read that the United Kingdom is the leader in the Human Rights Revolution, that the greatness of the United Kingdom is the Freedom of Speech and Human Rights Protection."

WRITE TO: The Home Secretary, Jack Straw, Fax 0171-2733965

CONTACT: National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns, 22 Berners St, Birmingham B19 2DR, UK. Tel: 0121-5546947; Fax: 0121-507 1567; E-mail <john@ncadc.demon.co.uk>

ADB's Dam-Building "Seriously Deficient"

The Asian Development Bank has been "seriously deficient" in quantifying and recognizing the impacts of the dams it has funded in the Mekong region, claims a report released in May by the International Rivers Network.

The report, documenting the Bank's dam-building activities in the watershed, calls for the Bank to impose a moratorium on all funding for energy projects in the Mekong region until it has studied renewable energy and energy efficiency options.

Bank-financed studies have identified the potential for over 50 large dams on the Mekong river and its tributaries. The ADB has conducted feasibility and engineering studies, directly financed projects, and mobilized resources from other aid donors and the private sector. Several dams have been approved and are under construction; others are in the pipeline. According to the report, the ADB:

- is failing to adhere to its own policies in the Mekong region,

particularly on energy, public participation and consultation;

- is subsidizing private companies vying to build dams in the region because hydropower projects are uneconomic for the private sector without public assistance;
- has failed to recognize the impact of dams on the rivers, fisheries, forests and livelihoods of local communities, and has failed to provide adequate compensation for those affected;
- has used consultants to conduct feasibility studies, environmental impact assessments and basin studies who consistently exaggerate the benefits of dams and downplay their costs;
- has failed to respond adequately to criticisms of its dam projects and continues to downplay their impacts.

CONTACT: International Rivers Network, 1847 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, California 94703, USA. Tel: +1 (510) 848 1155; Fax: +1 (510) 848 1008; E-mail <irn@irn.org>

Guyana Logging Moratorium Threatened

Amerindian and human rights groups in Guyana are attempting to block new legislation which would deal a severe blow to the country's moratorium on logging, in place for the past three years.

The new law would legalize the growing practice of granting "exploratory" leases to logging companies. These leases do not allow logging, but do permit companies to develop new areas and undertake forest inventories. Companies granted exploratory leases have been assured that logging licences will be granted for the areas once the moratorium is lifted.

The first lease was signed with the Malaysian-Guyanese company, Kwitaro, the second with the Malaysian company, Berjaya Berhad. At least two others are to be signed in the near future with Buchanan Forest Products Ltd. of Canada and Solid Timbers Berhad of Malaysia.

In total, the companies will receive rights to 750,000 acres of forest at a cost of \$20 per acre.

WRITE TO: His Excellency President Sam Hinds, Office of the President, New Garden Street, Georgetown, GUYANA. Fax: +592 2 63395

CONTACT: The Guyana Human Rights Association/Amerindian Peoples Association. Fax: +592 274948. E-mail: <ghra.guy@solutions2000.net>; Forest Peoples' Programme, 1c Fosseyway Business Centre, Stratford Rd, Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire GL56 9NQ. Tel: +44 (0)1608 852 893; Fax: +44 (0)1608 652898; E-mail <wrm@gn.apc.org>

- **WAHLI, a Jakarta-based NGO, has filed a civil action against President Suharto of Indonesia, accusing him of misusing a National Reforestation Fund.**

The Fund was established to finance environmental conservation, but has been used instead to bankroll various destructive projects, including a one million hectare rice project in Kalimantan.

Approximately £50 million from the Fund has been made available to the head of the Nusamba Group, Bob Hasan, to build a paper factory in Kalimantan.

In 1994, WAHLI launched a similar case when the fund lent £100 million to the state-owned company which was developing Indonesia's first aircraft.

CONTACT: Down to Earth — The Campaign for Ecological Justice in Indonesia, 59 Athenlay Road, London SE15 3EN, UK. Tel/Fax: +44 (0)171 732 7984. E-mail: <dte@gn.apc.org>

IN BRIEF ●●●●●

BIOBIO REPORT

World Bank President James Wolfensohn has reneged on his promise to release in full a report highly-critical of a loan by the International Finance Corporation to ENDESA, the Chilean electricity utility, for construction of the Pangue dam on the BioBio river.

ECUADOR ARRESTS

Five members of FUNDECOL, a community-based NGO in Ecuador, and at least seven members of a mangrove user association were detained in early June for protesting against the expansion of a shrimp farm in an area slated for community reforestation.

US MAD COW THREAT

The US FDA has imposed a partial ban on feeding rendered mammal remains back to ruminants (cud-chewing animals). But the ban exempts remains of pigs and horses, blood, milk and gelatin. The Consumers Union accuses the government of having "left the door open" for a mad cow-like disease to be transmitted in the US.

NUCLEAR REPROCESSING REPORT

SERA, the environmental pressure group affiliated to Britain's Labour Party, has called for an end to the reprocessing of nuclear waste in Britain. A SERA report shows that reprocessing is expensive and that a shift to dry storage of waste would not jeopardize jobs, would benefit public health, would reduce radioactive emissions, and could save up to £6.5 billion over the next decade.

LESOTHO WORKER KILLED

A sacked striker from the Lesotho Water Highlands Project was murdered in early June and his body dumped in the yard of a local community leader who lent his support to the strikers. Other sacked strikers are reported to be in fear of their lives. In May, another dismissed striker was beaten by police after he was overheard complaining about working conditions at the dam site.