The ongoing damage of radiation exposure
Advocate for expanded RECA legislation
Summer 2024

This August will mark the 79th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We will mourn the several hundred thousand Japanese hibakusha (atomic bomb victims) who died from the immediate blast effects, radiation sickness, or cancer caused by exposure to the blast. But even before August 6 and 9, 1945, tens of thousands of people in the U.S. had already been exposed to harmful levels of radiation from uranium processing (Missouri), plutonium production and processing (Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Hanford, Washington), and the first atomic explosion on July 16, 1945 (New Mexico).

As the United States rapidly increased its nuclear weapons arsenal after World War II, so did the radiation exposures of its citizens: uranium mining (mostly on indigenous land and by indigenous miners), uranium recycling (Fernald near Cincinnati), plutonium production and processing (Hanford; Savannah River, South Carolina), tritium production (Savannah River), plutonium fabrication (Rocky Flats near Denver), and atmospheric weapons testing (Nevada). These were only the largest facilities—many others were located around the country; additionally, extensive testing of hydrogen bombs was done in the Marshall Islands.

Even if we never detonate another U.S. nuclear weapon, the radioactive contamination from the mining, production, and testing of these weapons will continue to claim lives in the U.S. and around the world for generations to come.

~ Pax Christi USA’s Nuclear Disarmament Working Group

PRAY

>> Lift up the prayer of Pope Francis from November 2019 at the Peace Memorial in Hiroshima.

In a single plea to God and to all men and women of goodwill, on behalf of all the victims of atomic bombings and experiments, and of all conflicts, let us together cry out from our hearts:

Never again war, never again the clash of arms, never again so much suffering!

May peace come in our time and to our world.

>> Beginning Aug. 1, use the novena for nuclear disarmament at https://cutt.ly/disarmament-novena created by Pax Christi Maine and repurposed for the Archdioceses of Santa Fe and Seattle’s pilgrimage to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 2023.
STUDY

>> Read this article on the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act by Nuclear Disarmament Working Group members Nick Mele and Jim Thomas.

When you hear or read phrases like “atomic bomb” or “nuclear war,” what images flash through your mind? Perhaps you see mushroom clouds, fireballs, mounds of rubble. Then there are the ever-increasing costs of research, development, production, transportation and securing nuclear weapons. The hidden consequences of nuclear weapons include the results of radiation exposure in many communities in the United States where uranium has been mined, plutonium processed, nuclear tests conducted, and radioactive waste stored or simply carried by wind or water. Millions of people in the U.S. and elsewhere have been harmed by radiation-caused diseases, mostly cancer. Some are miners or nuclear workers, some are people who clean up radioactive waste, and many are simply people who live downwind or downstream from test sites, waste storage sites or processing facilities. Since the Trinity test explosion on July 16, 1945, radiation from such tests has drifted throughout the continental United States with particularly high exposures in the West.

Unlike the immediate effects of nuclear explosions, the harm done by radiation fallout can take decades to emerge. The 1990 passage of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) was a delayed response to the government’s failure to protect its citizens from government actions. RECA was quite limited. When the extent of the harm done to such people was first acknowledged by the U.S. government, RECA covered people in a few counties in Nevada, Utah and Arizona. Earlier this year, the U.S. Senate passed an expansion of the program (S. 3853) by a large bipartisan margin. The Senate bill will cover more people in more states, including New Mexico, Idaho and Montana. Unfortunately, House Speaker Mike Johnson is preventing the bill from coming to the floor of the House of Representatives.

The injustice of the limited eligibility for compensation spurred the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to write Congress in May 2024 urging the expansion of RECA. The letter, signed by Archbishop Borys Gudziak, chair of the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, notes the injustice: “This means that downwinders from the Trinity Test Site cannot be compensated for the illness, pain and death caused by radiation exposure, and numerous other persons in different states who have been exposed to radiation from weapons tests cannot be considered for presumptive eligibility. Those exposed to nuclear waste from the Manhattan Project stored in numerous states have also not been considered for compensation for radiation-related adverse health effects. Furthermore, the RECA cutoff date for uranium worker eligibility is 1971, but numerous uranium workers provided materials for weapons tests for almost two decades thereafter.”

ACT

>> Support RECA Expansion – Call your U.S. representative as soon as possible and ask them to urge Speaker Johnson to bring S. 3853 to the House floor for a vote before the August recess. The House of Representatives switchboard number is (202) 224-3121.

>> Call Speaker Johnson directly and urge him to bring S. 3853 to the House floor for a vote. Even if the Speaker is not your member of Congress, he is the key decision-maker on this issue, and everyone is urged to call his office: (202) 225-4000.

>> Engage with candidates running for office – This summer and fall, attend public forums of candidates, especially those running for Congress. Ask them to support the expansion of RECA and do what is right for the victims of our country’s acquisition of nuclear weapons.