

Nuclear veterans seek Commonwealth inquiry

By Paul Brown

Greenpeace and the British Nuclear Test Veterans called yesterday for a Commonwealth commission of inquiry into the effects of British nuclear tests which were held in Australia and Christmas Island in the Pacific in the 1950s.

The Royal Commission into the Australian nuclear tests starts its British hearings in London today. The veterans claim that not all the relevant documents will be made available by the Ministry of Defence.

At a press conference yesterday the veterans produced documents which they said showed that although Britain knew of the dangers which servicemen and natives faced little or nothing was done to protect them. The papers were marked secret, but had been found in public record offices 30 years later.

One of the documents, dated June 24, 1953, states that "the Government of Australia, advised by their own scientists, will satisfy themselves as to

the adequacy of the safeguards of life and property."

In the event no Australian scientist was involved in health and safety checks, and none attended the tests. The statement that the public would be safeguarded was read in the British and Australian Parliaments in 1953.

A second document, from the Medical Research Council in February 1947 concerning the effects of radiation on plants, animal, and man, warned that "all quantitative experiments show that even the smallest doses of radiation produce a genetic effect, there being no threshold dose below which no genetic effect is induced."

Mr George Pritchard, for Greenpeace, said that the statement that the Australian Government would look after the safety of its people placed a moral obligation upon it now.

"We are asking for justice for the civilian victims of tests and the test veterans," he said. Only a Commonwealth inquiry with countries involved who

had no vested interest in nuclear matters could be trusted to try to find out the full facts, he said.

Mr Glen Alcalay, a test veteran representative from America, said there were 66 atomic and hydrogen bomb explosions between 1946 and 1958.

He believed that it was not the money which would have to be paid to test veterans which was causing the official silence over the tests, but the broader issues of the dangers in the nuclear fuel cycle and the effects of low-level radiation on humans.

Mr Alcalay said that out of 3,800 US veterans with claims against the Government, 14 had received awards so far, all of them terminal cancer patients. Most of them had now died.

He said that Marshall Islanders in the Pacific were left unprotected in the path of fallout from the first major hydrogen bomb for three days before servicemen came to evacuate them. By that time the fall-out was three inches deep. The children had thought it was snow.

The radiation burns and subsequent diseases suffered by the people had been used as a blueprint by United States scientists to study the effects of nuclear war. This information had always been suppressed as a military secret, and was a terrible crime against innocent people, Mr Alcalay said.

Mr Ken McGinley, chairman of the British Test Veterans, said that the current National Radiological Protection Board's study into victims of British tests did not include genetic defects in children. The national average of genetic defects was less than 2 per cent, but among nuclear test veterans' children it was 16 per cent, he added.



Glen Alcalay: 'Fear behind official silence'



Ken McGinley: 'genetic defects in children'