



Health hazards

US military bases make bad neighbours. They don't just house troops and act as stepping-stones to military action. Many also function as testing grounds for the vast range of weapons – chemical, biological and nuclear – which are dreamt up by military planners. And even when they are just going about their day-to-day business, they rarely clean up after themselves.

The effects of this are that US military bases bring with them a whole range of health hazards. Dangerous pollutants such as depleted uranium and nerve gases, along with unexploded mines and shells, remain on testing grounds such as Vieques or several Panamanian bases. These prevent the population from returning to abandoned land and, in the case of Panama, have caused the numerous deaths of people who have strayed onto 37,000 acres of former firing ranges, which for long periods were neither fenced off nor properly marked.

Dangerous chemicals have, on sites such as Clark air base in Panama, not been properly stored, allowing them to leak onto land or into groundwater, causing sickness amongst local people.

Even when toxins are not being released as chemical or nuclear weapons tests, the health impacts of military bases can be severe. Tests at the former US navy base at Subic Bay in the Philippines have revealed poisonous chemicals such as PCBs, lead and fuel in groundwater, where it contaminates domestic water supplies, causing high rates of illness. Comments by former military personnel state that “tonnes of toxic chemicals” were dumped into Subic Bay. The displacement and cultural and economic degradations meted out by US base authori-

ties and the host governments which support them can also result in high levels of mental and emotional illnesses and suicides, especially amongst the most marginalised populations like those expelled from Diego Garcia and Thule in Greenland.

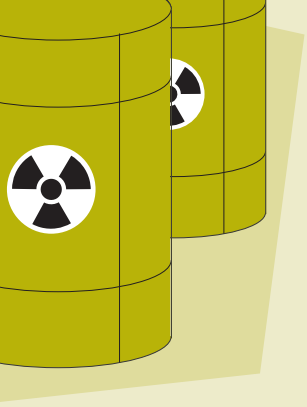
Guam

The US colony of Guam (*Guåhan* in its indigenous language) has suffered widespread pollution from massive US military bases. The health impacts of these are one of the main focuses of campaigns by the people of Guam against the military bases, as explained by activist Fanai Castro:

“United States colonisation of our islands, from 1898 to the present, has resulted in massive pollution from military sources. The dangerous substances released have included Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs); agents orange, blue, purple and white; and DDT, to name only a few. We have also been exposed to heavy metal and munitions dumping.

“Close to one million lbs (almost 450,000 kg) of mustard gas canisters stored on Guåhan decades ago have yet to be accounted for, though containers can still be found in the jungles or dug up from the ground. The village of Tanåpag on Sa’ipan was contaminated with PCBs that were transferred there by the US defence department, causing high rates of cancer. The US Army Corps of Engineers and the US Environmental Protection Agency “remedied” this problem by constructing an incinerator nearby and cremating the contaminated soil.

“In the Cold War race for nuclear armaments



the US detonated more than 168 nuclear bombs in the North Western Pacific, which spread radiation throughout the region in ocean currents and trade winds. Lying 1,200 miles west of the Marshall Islands, our archipelago was contaminated with nuclear fallout between the years 1946 and 1958. In November 1952 an officer discovered such extreme levels of radioactivity on his Geiger Counter that he immediately informed his supervisors, but was ordered 'to ignore the radioactivity and keep my mouth shut'. This has led to high rates of radiation-linked cancers on Guam.

"A conservative estimate shows that 1/3 of our 212 square mile island is dominated by the US military. This figure, however, is rapidly increasing as the 'Global War on Terror' has found in our islands and waters a playground for wartime activity, including military training, war 'games', the home porting of aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, and a Global Strike Task Force comprising unmanned reconnaissance aircraft and air fuel tankers, F/A-22 fighters and bombers. It is estimated that upwards of 55,000 military personnel, dependents, and contracted workers will be relocated to the island by 2014, adding to an already immense population of about 170,000. The Navy has already commenced the dredging of Apra Harbor to accommodate six nuclear submarines. Again it must be made clear that the public has not been given any sufficient information as to how this will affect our environment and health.

"For those of us who live in places of heavy military build-up, the health of our mind, body, and spirit is at stake. Involvement in the movement is natural. It comes from surviving as an indigenous Chamoru in

a colonised homeland. We are interconnected with our surroundings: toxins that are dumped in the ocean or buried in the lands deplete and kill the life that thrives in our environment. This is a heavy responsibility for those of us who are conscious of what is going on in the world today. In the face of such adversity, the greatest struggle is with our selves, to remain human. There is so much negativity coming with the build-up, so many who feel powerless to change what is happening. We must envision a better future and we must have the courage to act on this vision, planting the seeds of diversity with unity."

