DECLARATION OF BASEL

THE DEATH THAT CREEPS FROM THE EARTH

CALL FOR A BAN ON URANIUM

THE DEATH THAT CREEPS FROM THE EARTH

Indigenous peoples warn us: uranium is a mineral beyond our control.

by Claus Biegert

Without natural resources nothing would work: we need a steady stream of raw materials to keep the wheels of civilization turning. We are everything other than minimalists. We are a society of big spenders with a taste for the luxurious and we take little consideration of where the raw materials come from. At the same time we take what we need to indulge in our lifestyles, we destroy the basis of life. Growth economies are built upon this doomed dynamic.

Uranium ore. What distinguishes uranium from other minerals mined daily is our inability to master the element.

We delude ourselves by imagining that we have conquered uranium by having charted the heady physics needed to fuel nuclear fission. How wrong we are! And even though we know we're wrong we continue to embrace our cozy, happy delusion. To this day uranium ore is mined exactly like silver, gold, iron, zinc, coal... Across much of the globe, uranium mining claims are licensed in the traditional manner of earlier centuries. Yet uranium and its decay elements in the mining debris left behind emit deadly radiation for thousands of years, threatening the lives of those living there now and the generations to come. Our consumer society totally discounts this fundamental violation of human rights.

Before 1977 I paid little attention to uranium. At that time in Geneva the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization was meeting, a gathering made up of indigenous delegates from Alaska to the Andes. I was catching up with many old friends – since the Wounded Knee episode in 1973, I had traveled as a journalist across much of Indian Country – as well as acquiring many new ones. Among the latter was a recent high school graduate from northern Minnesota, Winona LaDuke, a young woman whose father was an Anishinabe medicine man enrolled at the White Earth Reservation. On the assembly's final evening I was sitting with a group of journalists at a table in the cafeteria, when Winona came over to me. In her hand she was carrying a piece of paper on which she had drawn the Navajo Reservation, her felt marker spotting the map with marks indicating deposits of uranium. „If you are going to continue to write about us, then you must write about uranium. Almost all of it is mined on Indian land.“ Winona's statement charted a large part of my career. A few months later I ran into Winona again at the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. She had since enrolled as a student of economics at Harvard University, and was working on the reservation during her semester break.

Already she was publishing articles on the lethal nature of uranium mining, and the reasons that it only took place on lands belonging to Native Americans – the first such articles to appear anywhere. Wherever uranium mining takes place the land is made uninhabitable. Eighty percent of the ore body's original radioactivity remains behind in the mining rubble. Wind and rain transport the radioactive dust across broad wide sweeps of land. Many Native American miners as well as those who worked in the processing plants died of diseases and cancers related to radiation exposure. Beginning with the Carter administration, Indian lands contaminated by radioactivity were officially branded, 'National Sacrifice Areas.' Often, these regions contained sites considered by the traditional land owners as sacred. Many believed that their degradation signaled coming calamity. The uranium industry's cynical practices deeply incensed Winona. But the mainstream world, as the nuclear industry continually summoned more and more uranium fuel, remained unmoved. Winona wrote and wrote; for years most of the articles exploring the uranium-mining-indigenous-peoples issue arrived from her pen. Traveling outside of the United States, she had found that the same problematic that had driven the uranium industry to Indian

lands in her country was also at work in Australia and Canada. There, too, uranium mining quite usually takes place on the isolated lands of indigenous peoples. There, too, the front-line victims are the traditional custodians of the land. There, too, the perpetrators of death are large, international mining concerns.

April 26, 1986: Chernobyl. Around the globe the catastrophic meltdown commanded major headlines.

My thoughts turned to the Navajo miners, and all the other people who perished due to exposure to radio-activity in or near the national sacrifice areas of the American southwest – the collateral damage of our nuclear society. These victims died outside the radar of mainstream news, didn't add up to a line of news copy. They perished unmentioned because they didn't fulfill the mainstream media's criterion for newsworthy.

Realizing that as a journalist I could do little to change that circumstance, I took a time out from my profession, joining the ranks of the activists I had come to know over the years. From that vantage point I came to appreciate how very little differentiates Germans from indigenous peoples when it comes to the struggle with the uranium menace: to fuel the Soviet Union's nuclear industry, our neighbors to the east in the German Democratic Republic worked the largest uranium mine in Europe: Wismut. For decades the people of the area were consumed by the same litany of health problems as those who lived on the Navajo Reservation.

Seeing that we were all in this together, the idea of the World Uranium Hearing (WUH) was born. Thanks to a handful of people sharing the same ideals, six years after Chernobyl, from September 13-18, 1992, the WUH took place in Salzburg, Austria. At the historic gathering, some one-hundred victims of uranium mining and milling from around the globe told an international audience of hundreds, 'The Board of Listeners,' about their daily trials with uranium mining, nuclear warhead testing, and the storage of nuclear wastes. We used as the WUH logo a representation of the Rainbow Serpent Petroglyph engraved on a rock that stands near the upper Yule River in northeast Australia on the ancestral lands of the Njamal people. In the mythology of many Aborigine clans the Rainbow Serpent, asleep in the earth, guards over those elemental forces beyond humankind's control. Any attempt to seize these underworld elements, their oral traditions tell us, will disturb the serpent from sleep, provoking its vengeance: a terrible deluge of calamity and death. The gathering culminated with a statement entitled, 'The Declaration of Salzburg.' Two years later the declaration was taken on by the UN-Working Group on Indigenous Populations in Geneva as an official document, which as E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.4/1994/7 6 June 1994 can be called up over the Internet in versions English, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese. You can also call it up by visiting www.nuclear-free.com/english/salzburg.htm. The Declaration of Salzburg ends with the demand: „Uranium and all radioactive minerals must remain in their natural location."

Later, when together with Christa Lubberger and Franz Moll (and soon afterwards Craig Reishus), I founded as the follow-up project to the WUH, the Nuclear-Free Future Award, we realized that our mission's focus must be centered on the beginning of the nuclear chain, the curse that

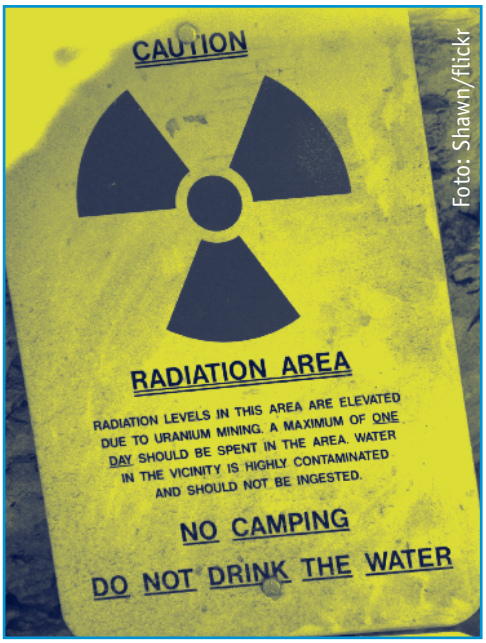

Foto: Shawn/flickr

is unleashed the moment the uranium is mined from the earth. In 1998 the premiere Awards ceremony took place in Salzburg, Austria, and since then, following invitations from our international supporters, has traveled the world. In 2005 we were guests at the Nobel Institute in Oslo, where Joe Shirley Jr., the Tribal President of the Diné Nation (Diné is the term used by the Navajo to refer to themselves; the word Navajo is Spanish in origin), was one of our annual laureates. He had given his signature to a tribal law that forbids uranium mining and milling on the land of the Diné into perpetuity. The following year at President Shirley's invitation we were guests in Window Rock Arizona, the seat of the Diné tribal government. The Awards Ceremony was the culminating event of a three-day gathering called the Indigenous World Uranium Summit. The Seventh Generation Fund was the chief organizer of the summit, which was subtitled „From Salzburg to Window Rock." Voices and transcripts you can find at www.sric.org/uraniumsummit.

Gathered at Window Rock included people from Canada, China, USA, Brazil, India, Australia, and the

South Pacific island of Vanuatu. Between Salzburg and Window Rock the world had witnessed the development and usage of depleted uranium (DU) munitions (shells that are hardened with uranium enrichment process wastes), as well as the birth of a new form of uranium mining: the in-situ leach method (by which uranium is stripped from the ore body by pumping a solution into the earth, thereby contaminating the local water table). Participants strongly felt that such summits should take place regularly and that a concerted effort must be made to get in contact with anti-nuclear groups in uranium-rich Africa, a step long overdue. The summit concluded with a statement that reaffirmed the Declaration of Salzburg, condemned the use of DU munitions, and demanded a worldwide end to open pit and in-situ leach uranium mining www.sric.org/voices/2006/v7n4/IWUS_Declaration.html .

In 2009 Günter Wippel, a German activist from the Black Forest, organized a tour across Europe for a group of African anti-nuclear activists coming from Niger, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania and Malawi. Publicity about the contamination and scandalous working conditions at uranium mines in the Sahara of Niger prompted an article in the popular mainstream German magazine, „Der Spiegel“. The tour cemented a number of anti-nuclear common goals among its far-flung participants, and by the end of the year they had formed a coalition headquartered in Malawi called The African Uranium Alliance.

Occasionally a news message races the rounds like water rushing downhill. Impediments may hinder, but nothing can stop it. The truth about uranium mining, though quite usually ignored by mainstream media, always found a place in the publications of Germany's International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), a partner organization of the Nuclear-Free Future Award since 2000. Add to this a firsthand encounter: Günter Baitsch, a cardiologist who heads IPPNW-Switzerland, witnessed on his travels how the survival of the Tuareg, a nomadic tribe of the Namibia desert, was so ominously threatened by the French uranium mining industry. And so the decision was made to form in Basel a pre-conference to the IPPNW World Congress 2010. The pre-conference, dedicated to the theme of uranium mining on the lands of indigenous peoples, would be called „Sacred Lands, Poisoned Peoples – Indigenous Peoples, Health and Uranium Mining“.

At the pre-conference the compelling statements by indigenous delegates from uranium-rich regions in Canada, the USA, India, Namibia, Niger and Australia convinced everyone present: uranium mining is a violation of human rights. One of the physicians in the room was moved to write a resolution condemning worldwide uranium mining and the processing of yellowcake (trade name for uranium oxide). The indigenous representatives saw their trips to Europe crowned with success. On August 29th the IPPNW's international board gave the green light: the resolution was adopted as the organization's official stance. The way from Salzburg to Window Rock had led to Basel.

The “Declaration of Basel,” and the IPPNW Resolution calling for a worldwide ban on uranium mining and the processing of yellowcake are yet another pair of milestones along the way: we must stop using energy from a source that consumes human lives.

Translation: Craig Reishus

Foto: Dan Budnik

DECLARATION OF BASEL

Summary statement presented at the conclusion of the conference
„Sacred Lands, Poisoned Peoples – Indigenous Peoples, Health and Uranium Mining“,
Preliminary Conference to the IPPNW-World Conference, Basel, Switzerland, August 26, 2010

PREAMBLE

Those assembled are unanimous in the judgment that uranium mining and milling in the production of yellow-cake (uranium oxide) imperils the environment and all living creatures, is a violation of human rights, and in its consequence undermines nuclear disarmament and deters world peace.
The gathered equally recognize that a technology that produces energy reliant on the mining of uranium ore and each step of the nuclear fuel chain thereafter, must be fundamentally abjured as a toxic hazard to life to-day and to the coming generations.
Further, the assembled realize that the deadly dangers radiating from each case study here presented will be challenged, clouded, denied and obfuscated by those in positions of public authority.

DECLARATION

The gathered – the majority of whom are representatives from indigenous nations scattered across five continents – reaffirm the Declaration of Salzburg, which was drafted at the conclusion of the World Uranium Hearing in September, 1992, and adopted in August, 1994, from the UNO Human Rights Commission in Geneva with the number E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.4/1994/7, 6 June 1994 as an UN-document. Owing to the creep of radioactive contamination around the planet, the gathered additionally wish to warn of the following developments in the nuclear industry which have taken place since 1992:

1. In situ leach mining is presented as a non-invasive superior process of mining uranium that leaves the surface of the land untouched. With this method the uranium is extracted chemically from the ore body in the earth and pumped to the surface, whereby the chemical solutions remain in the earth. In situ leach mining permanently endangers the ground water table.

2. The tailings resulting from conventional uranium mining contaminate large sweeps of land, endangering all life in the region; no continent escapes this toxic burden. The renaturation of the land once mines are closed must be the responsibility of the uranium mining concerns; such renaturation must be accomplished with state-of-the-art technology.

3. Boundaries are by nature superficial and cannot halt the spread of radioactivity. Yet uranium mining licenses are granted allowing uranium mining to be conducted at the edges of indigenous territories and Indian reservations. Radioactivity heeds no land lease or title.

4. Commons are the natural resources of the earth for which everyone must share custodial responsibility, first and foremost our air, our water, our earth. Indigenous peoples urge a radical shift in ecological thinking whenever and wherever they meet with representatives of industrial nations. The mining of uranium, the use of depleted uranium (DU) munitions, and the storage of radioactive wastes permanently endanger the purity of the commons.

5. Sacred Sites / Sacred Lands. When nothing more is treated as holy, than everything is at risk. In the absence of the sacred, nothing can hinder the destruction of the commons. The spiritual bond with the earth and the recognition of all living creatures fundamental rights is a guiding precept of the Indigenous worldview. The protection of the sacred sites of indigenous cultures cannot be solved by any measure of law; the decision makers of industrial nations are called upon to understand the ethical concept of indigenous peoples as a basic principle for achieving a sustainable economy and as an environmental guarantee for a livable future.

6. Follow-up costs of uranium production include the renaturation of the mining region, the compensation of all victims, and the payment of all health expenses for those consequentially at risk now, as well as the coming generations so long as need arises.

7. Protection of workers: the resistance against uranium mining cannot ignore the issues of those people for whom uranium mining and milling represent the sole economic means of survival. Their protection at the workplace, the recognition of their work-related infirmities, and their medical care, must be demanded with the same insistence and pressure as the campaign to prohibit new uranium mining.

8. Advertising campaigns, funded by the nuclear industry, are meant to convince populations to accept nuclear power. Here it is essential that people at every level receive clarification, and that such disinformation is corrected. Nuclear power is neither „green energy" nor „climate friendly." Any story of sustainable uranium mining is an impossible fiction. Only by ignoring the protection of its employees and by evading all follow-up costs can the nuclear industry pretend nuclear energy is superior.

ADDENDA

Although this assembly focuses exclusively on the extraction of uranium ore from the earth, those gathered wish to additionally draw attention to two important aspects as regards nuclear weapons:

1. Depleted uranium (DU), a plentiful waste by-product of the uranium enrichment process used to fuel nuclear power plants, is used to densify ammo casings, turning ordinary shells into de facto dirty bombs. The radioactive, toxic nano-dust set free contaminates entire regions for generations after the hostilities are ceased.

2. Spread of nuclear technology and consequent proliferation of nuclear arms: the old order of the classic atomic powers can spring apart at any moment. The civil and military uses of the atom are closely twined. More nuclear states or powers means more demand for uranium.

CONCLUSION

The Declaration of Salzburg ends with the appeal: „Uranium and other radioactive minerals must remain in their natural location." At the Indigenous World Uranium Summit, 2006, in Window Rock, Arizona – on the land of the Diné Nation – the assembled made the demand in their conclusionary statement that all uses of uranium must be prohibited.
Those assembled in Basel, supported by their home communities in their homelands, reaffirm both declarations, and summarily demand:

URANIUM AND ALL RADIOACTIVE SUBSTANCES MUST REMAIN IN THEIR NATURAL LOCATION.

INTERNATIONAL PHYSICIANS FOR THE PREVENTION OF NUCLEAR WAR

19th World Congress – Basel, Switzerland
August 2010

RESOLUTION
Adopted on August 29, 2010
Title of Resolution: Global call to action for a ban on uranium mining
Affiliates: IPPNW Germany and PSR/IPPNW Switzerland

BE IT RESOLVED THAT:
Uranium ore mining and the production of uranium oxide (yellowcake) are irresponsible and represent a grave threat to health and to the environment. Both processes involve an elementary violation of human rights and their use lead to an incalculable risk for world peace and an obstacle to nuclear disarmament.

The International Council of IPPNW therefore resolves that:
IPPNW call for appropriate measures to ban uranium mining worldwide.

Reasons for Above:
Uranium mining contaminates groundwater and radioactivity remains in the heaps, tailings and evaporation ponds. Uranium and its radioactive decay elements are highly toxic. They attack inner organs and the respiratory system. Scientific studies have shown that the following diseases are caused by exposition to radon gas, uranium and uranium's decay elements: Bronchial and lung cancer; cancer of the bone marrow, stomach, liver, intestine, gall bladder, kidneys and skin, leukemia, other blood diseases, psychological disorders and birth defects.

Approximately three-quarters of the world's uranium is mined on territory belonging to indigenous peoples. The inhabitants of affected regions are (for the most part) vulnerable to exposure from radioactive substances that threaten them with short- and long-term health risks and damaging genetic effects.

As well as the direct health effects from contamination of the water, the immense water consumption in mining regions is environmentally and economically damaging – and in turn detrimental for human health. The extraction of water leads to a reduction of the groundwater table and thereby to desertification; plants and animals die, the traditional subsistence of the inhabitants is eliminated, the existence of whole cultures are threatened.

This is not all. Ending uranium mining – also because of its relevance to the processing of uranium, its military use, the production of nuclear energy and the unresolved problem of how to permanently dispose of nuclear waste – would represent a provision of preventive health care, as well as a policy of peace and reason.

Banning uranium mining would reduce the risk of proliferation. It would make uranium resources more scarce, thus accelerating the abandonment of the civil use of nuclear energy. The pressure on political decision-makers to find safe methods of permanently disposing of nuclear waste would increase. Banning uranium mining would thus promote the phasing-out of the irresponsible practice of using nuclear energy and increase pressure globally to force a change-over to renewable energies.

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The Nuclear-Free Future Award

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