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The Rear Admiral— Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama



Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, former Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander and current Prime Minister of Fiji

Source: Islands Business.

They gathered slowly at the Suva Civic Centre, in the heart of the Fijian capital. On 30 January 2015, Fiji's surviving Christmas Island veterans, their friends, families and supporters came together for a long-awaited ceremony.

Standing before the crowded hall, Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama announced that his newly elected government would provide a financial grant to the surviving veterans and to the families of those who have died:

Fiji is not prepared to wait for Britain to do the right thing. We owe it to these men to help them now, not wait for the British politicians and bureaucrats. So today, I have the great honour to award these survivors a modest token of what we can afford to finally acknowledge the great injustice that was done to them almost six decades ago.

You may ask: why is Fiji taking responsibility for something that is the fault of Britain? My answer is this: Too much time has passed. The ranks of these survivors are rapidly thinning. Too many men—our fellow Fijians—have gone to their graves without justice. Those who remain deserve justice and Fiji as a nation is determined for them to finally get it.¹

For Bainimarama, the debt owed was personal. As a Chief Petty Officer, his father Inoke led the first contingent of 39 Fiji Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (FRNVR) sailors to Christmas Island. The younger Bainimarama had also served in the Fiji Navy, rising to the rank of Rear Admiral before taking power in a military coup in 2006. After eight years of governing by decree, the September 2014 national elections had brought Bainimarama to the office of prime minister.²

Speaking to the ceremony, he was blunt about the long delay to recognising the veterans' needs:

We need to erase this blight on our history. We need to lift the burden on our collective conscience. There is a saying that justice delayed is justice denied. And these men have been denied justice long enough.

To them I say: We salute you for following your orders at the time, the orders of a colonial power pursuing its own agenda in the world. You are living testament to our determination to never again allow our pristine Pacific environment to be violated by outside powers in such a destructive and terrible manner.³

1 Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama: 'Speech at the first payout to veterans of Operation Grapple', media release, Office of the Prime Minister, Suva, Fiji, 30 January 2015.

2 For background to the 2006 coup, see Jon Fraenkel and Stewart Firth: *From election to coup—the 2006 campaign and its aftermath* (ANU E Press, Canberra, 2007).

3 Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama: 'Speech at the first payout to veterans of Operation Grapple', op. cit.

The road to the ceremony was long and arduous, involving campaigns by veterans and their supporters, networking with other nuclear survivors and telling truth to power.

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Britain's obligation to the Fijians serving in the British armed forces during the 1950s is clearly set out in the Colonial Office archives. At the time Fijian soldiers were recruited for service on Christmas Island in 1958, the Secretary of State for the Colonies guaranteed the Governor of Fiji that the UK Government would undertake the costs, including indemnity claims for disability pensions arising from any injuries, as a charge on UK funds. Over the next six months, there was extensive correspondence between the Ministry of Supply, Treasury, the Government Actuary and other officials to clarify this indemnity.⁴

On 27 June 1958, the Ministry of Supply told the Colonial Office that 'we had received Treasury agreement to ... our undertaking to indemnify the Fijian government against claims for disability pensions or gratuities'.⁵

Ministry of Supply officials confirmed information had been passed to the Governor in Fiji that:

The Ministry of Supply has undertaken to indemnify the Government of Fiji against claims for pensions to which men of the Fijian Military Forces or their dependants may become entitled to as a result of death or injury sustained by them during their service on the Nuclear Weapons Testing Base at Christmas Island in the Pacific.⁶

Decades later, Paul Ah Poy and other young men who supported God, Queen and Empire have become bitter about the British Government's refusal to recognise their role, let alone provide even token compensation.

Given the diversity of participants in Britain's testing program in Australia and Kiribati, there has often been confusion or disharmony amongst the veterans, as an ageing cohort of men tries to decide the best way to approach

4 Collated in UK National Archives file PAC.310/4/012. CO1036/514.

5 Outward telegram from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to Sir Ronald Garvey, Fiji, 'Priority/confidential number 5', 6 January 1958, (marked 'Confidential'). CO1036/514.

6 Letter from G.M.P. Myers, Ministry of Supply, to D.J. Dery, Colonial Office, London, 17 June 1958. CO1036/514.

government and assert their rights. The main coordinating group in each country has seen disgruntled or eccentric members breaking away to form their own sub-groups.⁷

In all countries, nuclear veterans have been critical of the Returned Services association or league, arguing that the official body has failed to actively support their calls for pensions and compensation.⁸ For example, Fiji's Christmas Island veterans feel that some other returned service personnel saw Operation Grapple as a peacetime operation, without the danger—or valour—of armed conflict. Added to this, veterans of the Grapple contingent returning to Fiji were initially not eligible for Fiji's Aftercare Fund, a pension scheme for personnel who served in overseas armed conflicts.

Tekoti Rotan notes that the Christmas Island veterans' campaign has sometimes been met with criticism from other members of Fiji's Returned Services Association:

They ask 'why are you asking for more money now?'. It's because we suffered. You died on the spot but for us, no. Our children are affected and that's the big difference between your task and our task. That is why we are complaining, because we need support. So now they're slowly realising it.⁹

The problems of distance, time and official secrecy hamper the efforts of elderly and often sick men. From the 1980s, some Fijian soldiers tried to gain information from London, with limited success. In December 1989, former Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) warrant officer Jiovesa Ramacake wrote to the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) listing the military personnel who had served on Christmas Island and seeking information on pension schemes:

7 In New Zealand, for example, the late Trevor Humphrey established RIMPAC as a separate group, publishing the newsletter *Prickley Heat* between 1996 and his death a decade later. For a collation of documents, see Trevor Humphrey: *A pixie in a mushroom patch* (self-published, Wanganui, 1996), copy of newsletter and book in the University of Hawai'i at Manoa library.

8 See, for example, the critique of the New Zealand Returned Services Association (NZRSA) published in *Prickley Heat*, Vol. 3, No. 4, August 1999 after the NZRSA backed the government's position on war pensions. See also 'NZRSA offers minister support with A-Test survey', *NZRSA Review*, Vol. 58, No. 5, October 1987.

9 Interview with Tekoti Rotan, Suva, Fiji, November 2016.

There is a rumour amongst us ex-servicemen who had served as human guinea pigs during the hydrogen and atomic bomb tests that were held on Christmas Island in 1958, that there is some compensation for us. However we cannot be certain, for we all have retired from the service and such news are hard to come by. Should it be true then I would be most grateful if you would supply me with all the available information.¹⁰

A short reply from the MoD noted:

I have to say that there is no special compensation scheme. However, if you or your fellow colleagues believe that you are suffering from ill health, disease or illness that could be attributable to negligence on behalf of the Ministry of Defence, then it is open to you to make a claim in common law.¹¹

In the mid-1990s, Fiji's Christmas Island veterans began to share stories and organise amongst themselves. Paul Ah Poy, the current President of the Fiji Nuclear Veterans Association, was one of the early organisers:

We still didn't know what was wrong with us until Losena Salabula of the Pacific Concerns Resource Centre [PCRC] put an ad in the paper and on the radio for all the veterans to go up to [the PCRC office in] Toorak and get together. So we all went up there and started to talk about our family. Then we knew that something was really wrong.

When Ratu Inoke Bainimarama formed the association for the nuclear veterans returned from Christmas Island, only us sailors from the Naval Association joined up. There wasn't very many of us so I suggested 'what about the others, the soldiers?' So he thought it was a good idea and then we all got together.

Unfortunately, he died a few years later on, so we asked Ratu Jone Tabaiwalu to be the leader. We chose him as our president, but he didn't last long. He was our leader for another three years but he died. We had an election and I was elected as President of our association, which I am still, right now.¹²

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10 'British hydrogen and atomic bomb tests—Christmas Island 1958', letter from J.N. Ramacake, Nausori, Fiji to UK Ministry of Defence, 20 December 1989 (copy in author's files).

11 Letter from S. McIntosh, Ministry of Defence, London to J.N. Ramacake, Nausori, 11 January 1990; letter from Peter Smart, UK ambassador to Fiji, to Sailosi Kepa, Minister for Justice and Attorney General, 5 February 1990 (copies in author's files).

12 Interview with Paul Ah Poy, Suva, Fiji, November 2016.

From the mid-1990s, the New Zealand Nuclear Test Veterans Association (NZNTVA) also began campaigning, pressing for war pensions from New Zealand and compensation from the United Kingdom, fundraising for the Massey University genetic research and liaising with veterans associations in Australia, Fiji, Britain and France.¹³

As well as supporting Grapple veterans, the NZNTVA began working with NZ sailors deployed on HMNZS *Otago* and HMNZS *Canterbury* to waters off French Polynesia in July 1973 to protest against French nuclear weapons testing at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls.¹⁴ The NZ Government was undecided whether the Moruroa veterans had been affected by radiation, but NZNTVA argued that any war pension recognition and other gains made by the Operation Grapple veterans should also apply to veterans deployed to French Polynesia.

On 30 March 1998, the NZ Government announced that Operation Grapple veterans would be eligible for the highest war pension available to New Zealand returned serviceman.¹⁵ In June that year, NZ Prime Minister Jenny Shipley also announced that compensation would be made to the children of Operation Grapple veterans who had been affected genetically through their parents' exposure to radiation.

Important steps, but for NZNTVA's Roy Sefton, there's still a way to go:

In New Zealand, you get a war pension because of your service and any health outcomes that may be due to it. But a pension is not compensation. If we were to be granted compensation by the British Government, it wouldn't affect our war pension from the New Zealand Government. However, we were advised that the NZ Government would not pay both a pension and compensation. This made obtaining compensation from the UK Government all the more important for NZNTVA.

We applied to get the American system of presumptive lists of illnesses here in New Zealand. There are a whole lot of conditions listed, and if you've got one, at least you get a pension for that. You're looking at more

13 A full run-down of activities is detailed in Roy Sefton: 'NZNTV Association', *Navy Times*, September 2002, p. 11.

14 Gerry Wright: *Mururoa Protest* (Zenith Print, New Plymouth, n.d.). The NZ Moruroa veterans went on to establish their own network, and were eventually given War and Emergency status, qualification for the New Zealand Special Service Medal (Nuclear Testing) and included in the Nuclear Presumptive List.

15 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer: 'Peters delivers on promise to nuclear test veterans', media release, 30 March 1998. See also Cathy Bell: 'H-bomb tests crews win pension', *Dominion*, 31 March 1998.

than 20 cancers where, if you've got one and you've got your doctor to confirm it, then almost in return a pension comes back. It's the same if you're a widow and your husband has died from a declared illness.

Our government eventually announced presumptive lists for all theatres of war and emergencies that NZ forces had been involved in. NZ nuclear test veterans or their widows, on medical certification, automatically qualify for a pension for 26 listed health conditions. Additionally, government now offers assistance to children who suffer five specified health conditions.

The Department of Veterans Affairs in New Zealand were happy to accept this system because it cut down the waiting list. Beyond this, however, there are a number of conditions that aren't recognised by the establishment as being related to radiation—a common one is heart disease and frequently the government tries to get around recognising that as a problem.¹⁶



New Zealand nuclear veterans receive the New Zealand Special Service Medal (Nuclear Testing)

Source: Courtesy Roy Sefton.

To address the issue of recognition for service, NZNTVA pressed the NZ Government to issue a medal for those who had served at Operation Grapple and the 1973 French Polynesia deployment. The New Zealand

16 Interview with Roy Sefton, Palmerston North, New Zealand, November 2015.

Special Service Medal (Nuclear Testing) was approved by Queen Elizabeth in 2002, to be awarded to all NZ nuclear test veterans. More than 700 NZ personnel have been granted the medal since that time, recognising 'the service of those personnel who were part of an official New Zealand Government presence at an atmospheric nuclear test between 1956 and 1973'.¹⁷

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In Fiji, veterans had a longer struggle for recognition and financial support. The issue of access to the After-Care Fund would only be rectified by government legislation four decades after veterans returned from Christmas Island.

The publication of the book *Kirisimasi* by the Pacific Concerns Resource Centre (PCRC) in June 1999 sparked widespread public interest and spurred government action.¹⁸ The newly elected Coalition Government under Labour Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry quickly agreed to address the longstanding problem that participation in the British nuclear testing program was seen as a peacetime operation, ineligible for support from Fiji's military pension scheme. On 16 July 1999, the Fiji Minister of Finance declared that Operation Grapple was an 'active operation', opening the way for changes to war pensions' legislation.

That year, Paul Ah Poy also travelled to England to lobby UK parliamentarians. On 20 October 1999, he stood alongside members of the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association (BNTVA) in the British House of Commons at a meeting with MPs, and stated:

I have journeyed far from the other side of the world to bring to you the testimony of what is left of the men and family of the Fijian soldiers and sailors and i-Kiribati ... We should be remembered, because we took Fiji's name there, we went as Fiji soldiers. I thank God for this opening, where the issue about us who went to Christmas Island is brought up. We should be remembered.¹⁹

17 *The New Zealand Special Service Medal (Nuclear Testing)*, New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) website at: medals.nzdf.mil.nz/category/f5/f5.html.

18 Excerpts and photos from the book were widely published in the Fiji media: 'Tavo na italanoa ni vakalutu gasaukuro', *Nai Lalakai*, 24 June 1999; 'Blast from the past—lest we forget' *Fiji Daily Post*, 26 June 1999, pp. 20–21.

19 Speech by Paul Ah Poy, UK House of Commons, London, 20 October 1999. Copy in author's files.

On 1 December 1999, the House of Representatives in Fiji finally debated amendments to the After-Care Fund Act, which would allow all military personnel who served in Operation Grapple to access Fiji's returned services pension scheme.²⁰ As Home Affairs Minister Joji Uluinakauvadra noted:

Unlike our veterans of the Second World War and the Malayan campaign, our servicemen who served in Operation Grapple do not have access to the Fiji servicemen After-Care Fund ... Whilst there is no readily available data on those who were affected by nuclear radiation in Operation Grapple, it is however necessary to put in place mechanisms which can assist those who may be affected. At present none exist.²¹

During the debate, politician after politician from both sides of the aisle rose to condemn the British Government's failure to act. Opposition leader Ratu Inoke Kubuabola—who in 2017 serves as Defence Minister in the Bainimarama Government—stated:

These men and women were put to unnecessary and unwarranted risk and as you know, nuclear testing is an evil which we have never supported of our own free will. This exercise was taken in the interests of our colonial masters and we were used as guinea pigs ... It is only now that we are being told of the damaging effects, traumatic effects, physical as well as psychological of participation in such exercises. In this spirit, the British were supposed to be our trustees. They were obliged to do, according to the Deed of Cession, a treaty of contracts to safeguard not just our rights and interests, but our persons as well, which included our health.

I believe, Mister Speaker, the British were negligent in this instant, extremely negligent, for the well-being of our service personnel and we must fulfil our obligations to our people. At the same time, this is a case where the British must fulfil their responsibilities. They should be asked to compensate the ex-servicemen involved, as well as families, that is the wives and children of those who were taken to Malden Island and Christmas Island.²²

20 'House passes bill to cater for Christmas Island veterans', *Fiji Sun*, 14 December 1999; 'Bill for former soldiers passed', *Fiji Times*, 14 December 1999; 'Fiji soldiers guinea pigs in nuclear testing', *Fiji Sun*, 14 December 1999.

21 Debate over Fiji Servicemen's After-Care Fund (Amendment) Bill 1999, Daily Hansard, House of Representatives, Parliament of Fiji, Wednesday, 1 December 1999, p. 1933.

22 Debate over Fiji Servicemen's After-Care Fund (Amendment) Bill 1999, Daily Hansard, House of Representatives, Parliament of Fiji, Wednesday, 1 December 1999, pp. 1936–1937.

In the subsequent Senate debate, MP John Ali affirmed:

Our soldiers had done their part. They have done their service to their colonial masters. What equity has the colonial masters done? What have they done for our ex-servicemen? Nothing, sir. They are only prepared to go to the international forums and point a finger at other countries as terrorists. But is it not terrorism to use innocent people as guinea pigs and leave them on the road?²³

The bill finally passed the Fiji Senate on 13 December 1999.²⁴ This opened the way for Grapple veterans, for the first time, to apply for a monthly allowance of F\$94 for welfare, medical care, supply of surgical appliances and loans for the education of their children.²⁵

This small step by the Fiji Government was not matched by the British Government. Even though they served the British Empire when Fiji was under colonial rule, Fijians today are not included in the class of service personnel eligible for a British war pension, unless they currently serve in the British Armed Forces.²⁶

After the amendment of the After-Care Fund legislation, the Chaudhry Government made commitments to carry the veterans' claims before the UK Government. However, this pledge was soon overtaken by events. After the May 2000 coup in Fiji, Chaudhry and members of his Coalition Government were held hostage for nearly two months, then removed from office.²⁷

23 Senator Ali, Debate over Fiji Servicemen's After-Care Fund (Amendment) Bill 1999, Daily Hansard, Senate, Parliament of Fiji, Wednesday, 1 December 1999, p. 1933.

24 An Act to Amend the Fiji Servicemen's After-Care Fund Act, Act no. 41 of 1999 replaced the term 'war service' with 'campaign service', including the Malayan campaign and Operation Grapple within the remit of the Act.

25 Frederica Delailomaloma: 'Bill for former soldiers passed', *Fiji Times*, 14 December 1999; Reggie Dutt: 'Fiji soldiers guinea pigs in nuclear testing', *Fiji Sun*, 14 December 1999; 'Bill to benefit ex-servicemen', *Daily Post*, 14 December 1999.

26 UK Pension Service Order of 1983, part 2, schedule 4. As of 19 November 2002, only 30 war pensions being paid to UK nuclear test veterans were associated with their participation in nuclear tests—16 to nuclear test veterans themselves and the remainder to their widows. Data from 'Minutes of Evidence', UK Select Committee on Defence, *Legacy Issues for the Armed Forces Pension Scheme: Compensation for nuclear test veterans*, March 2003.

27 On the 2000 coup, see Robbie Robertson and William Sutherland: *Government by the gun—the unfinished business of Fiji's 2000 coup* (Pluto Press, Annandale, 2001); Brij V. Lal and Michael Pretes (eds) *Coup—reflections on political crisis in Fiji* (Pandanus Books, Canberra, 2001).

With support from PCRC, the veterans continued to carry their case to international audiences and connect with other nuclear survivors. In two trips to meet with Japanese antinuclear activists in 2002 and 2003, Tekoti Rotan tied the Fijian experience to that of Japanese *hibakusha* (nuclear survivors):

We stand in solidarity with you as we know what you had suffered as a result of the bombing in World War Two. We consider the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6 and Nagasaki on 9 August 1945 to be an atrocity to the human race because it involved the mass killing of women and children. We support our joint call for compensation for the suffering endured ... For a long time you and me had relied too much on what the scientist and our political leader said to us. But what did we find? It only brings trouble, poverty, and death to us.²⁸

In Kiribati, the descendants of Christmas Island residents have not organised in the same way as the Fijian military personnel, but Catholic and Protestant denominations have continued to highlight the nuclear legacy.

In 2005, a regional ecumenical meeting was organised by the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) in Tarawa. It brought together nuclear survivors from Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Tahiti, Fiji and Australia to review the legacies of five decades of nuclear testing in Oceania. Reverend Baranite Kirata of the Kiribati Protestant Church, which hosted the meeting, proclaimed:

The message of the Lord is clear: you shall not kill and you shall love thy neighbour as yourself. These commandments were ignored by those who tested weapons of mass destruction in the Pacific. The people of the Pacific continue to seek the truth in relation to the health and environmental impacts of nuclear testing.²⁹

Paul Ah Poy also travelled to Tahiti to meet survivors of French nuclear testing. In 2006, he participated in activities commemorating the 40th anniversary of the first French nuclear test on Moruroa Atoll. The meeting was organised by *Moruroa e Tatou*, the association of former

28 Speech by Tekoti Rotan to International Meeting, World Conference on A and H Bombs, Tokyo, August 2002.

29 Media release from Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) workshop, Tarawa, Kiribati, 7–9 February 2005.

Maohi workers who staffed the French nuclear test sites at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls, during France's 193 atmospheric and underground tests in the South Pacific.

As Fiji returned to parliamentary rule after the 2000 Speight coup, PCRC's Losena Salabula was elected to parliament as a minister in the subsequent government led by Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. The incoming leader also pledged support for the veterans:

As the colonial power that had absolute authority over the Fiji islands, Britain had the great responsibility. It was responsible for the health and welfare of the people that were taken there. I think most important of all, if there were to be any tests, they should have ensured that there was absolutely no way that the health and safety of those people was going to be compromised.

Now the evidence that is before us would suggest that there were in fact real dangers to these people. I would go as far as to say that Britain did not take sufficient caution to safeguard the health and security of our people. They have only said they have no responsibility whatsoever ... So that's the stand that Britain has been taking, which is most unfair and very unfortunate. I think the very least is to start talking to the Fijian Government and other governments that were affected, even if only to determine whether there is a case or not. That would be a very good start.³⁰

However, before negotiations between Fiji and the United Kingdom could start, Qarase was overthrown in another military coup in December 2006, led by then Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama.³¹ It took another eight long years of organising and lobbying, and the return to parliamentary rule after September 2014 elections, for the veterans' long campaign to bear fruit.

30 Interview with Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, 'Nuclear fallout', *Dateline*, SBS TV, July 2003 (Transcript on *Journeyman Films* at www.journeyman.tv/film_documents/1700/transcript/).

31 Jon Fraenkel, Stewart Firth and Brij V. Lal: *The 2006 military takeover in Fiji—a coup to end all coups?* (ANU E Press, Canberra, 2009).

At a ceremony on 30 January 2015, 26 surviving Christmas Island veterans were each presented with a cheque for F\$9,865 (around US\$4,700).³² After receiving his award, 80-year-old Jone Velivai said:

I have waited for more than 60 years for this day. I am thankful that I could live to witness this.³³

After years of struggle, the leaders of the Fiji Nuclear Veterans Association were overwhelmed with emotion. Tekoti Rotan explained:

I notice that when we ask for meetings, very few people turn up, because they don't have the money for their fares. But that day, oh! That city hall, we were swollen, the veterans and their family members, everyone was excited. They say, now we are being recognised that we suffer.

We were grateful to the present Prime Minister because his father was also involved in the operation. It's very generous of him to do it like that and he's trying to make the British wake up. Fiji shouldn't be doing this, but he is doing it to make the British people know that they should do something.³⁴

The Bainimarama Government stressed that this grant was not compensation for death, injury or illness, which is still the responsibility of the UK Government. Instead, then Minister for Defence, National Security and Immigration Timoci Natuva stressed the grant was:

a one off payment as medical assistance, in recognition of the various ailments these veterans had suffered over the years since 1960, after their exposure to nuclear radiation during the tests at Christmas Islands ... The payment is to help compensate some of the medical costs that had been borne by the veterans and families over the years and is not a form of compensation, as there is an ongoing legal case between the Veterans Association and the British Government.³⁵

32 Those who were presented their payment on 30 January 2015 included Maciu Suguturaga, Tomasi Vasuca, Maleli Naigulevu, Wame Turaga, Peniame Silatole, Jona Vakaotia, Jone Varivai, Tekoti Rotan, Nacanieli Seru, Levaci Nawaqa, Emori Ligaca, Saiasi Tagayawa, Tevita Batikaciwa, Silivakadua Rakaria, Rt Kamarusi Kini, Josefa Ifa, Paul Ah Poy, Amani Tuimalabe, Anare Bakele, Ropate Voreqe, Ilimotama Baka, Rt Busa Rusiate, Qalo Isireli Nairevurevu, Vatimi Lagicere, Niko Buke, and Naibuka Naicegulevu.

33 Litia Cava: 'Veterans Salute Govt', *Fiji Sun*, 1 February 2015; See also Mere Naleba: 'Payout for nuclear veterans', *Fiji Times*, 30 January 2015.

34 Interview with Tekoti Rotan, Suva, Fiji, November 2016.

35 'Government to disburse funds to veterans of Christmas Islands Operation Grapple', Fiji Ministry of Defence media release, 29 January 2015.

In its 2015 budget, the Fiji Government allocated F\$2.95 million to the MoD to cover the payouts to the veterans, their widows and children. To calm the fears of government ministers about the size of the payout, officials presented a formula calculating each payment as ‘50 cents a day’. In fact, the total sum was calculated at a rate of 50 cents for 365 days—backdated for 54 years!³⁶

Over the next year, a Task Force involving the MoD, RFMF and Fiji Nuclear Veterans Association travelled the country to distribute the remaining funds to veterans who were too ill or aged to travel to Suva. As Paul Ah Poy travelled with the government delegation, he was often overwhelmed with sadness:

I was deeply touched when I had to go and meet the families. I had to go and travel all over the island to hand over the cheque and interview the children, the grandchildren. With the Defence group, they were quite happy just doing their work. But for me, it was different, because I was involved with the testing program. Each evening I had to go home, thinking of the little children. Why did they have to suffer?³⁷

For the ageing veterans, often living in rural villages and peri-urban settlements, the financial grant provided funding to fix their houses, support their children or pay off health bills. Isaia Seruvatu Baro, for example, said his payment would be put towards longstanding medical problems:

I would like to thank the Fijian Government for recognition of our service. This money will surely assist me in buying my hearing aid and payment towards my eye surgery.³⁸

While the Fijian and NZ veterans have welcomed the financial support and recognition of their own government, they still direct responsibility home to the government and people of the United Kingdom. For Tekoti Rotan, the responsibility still lies in London:

We feel sorry, because we looked up to the British government as our father, we believed in them and we hope that they will be honest with us and look after us ... We asked the British to be honest and to fulfil their commitment to us, because our people are suffering, especially the women.

36 Personal communication from Ministry of Defence official, Suva, May 2016.

37 Interview with Paul Ah Poy, Suva, Fiji, November 2016.

38 Tevita Vuibau: ‘Joy for war veteran exposed to nuke test’, *Fiji Times*, 22 February 2015.

We are concerned with the widows, young women left behind with three, five kids because their husband died prematurely. Tough job, tough job. They're the ones who suffer more than us. We men are all right, but the women bring up children, feed them, clothe them. We are fortunate that the Fiji Government is providing free bus fare and free education. Without this the women will suffer or die, that's the worry of how to bring up their families.³⁹

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In 2015, the UK Chancellor announced a grant of £25 million for an Aged Veterans Fund to 'alleviate suffering and increase wellbeing' of UK military personnel. The fund began operations in April 2016 and a Nuclear Community Charity Fund (NCCF) received approval to launch five projects benefiting nuclear veterans. The decision, however, to transform the BNTVA from a campaigning organisation to a charity reliant on government funding has caused significant debate, with criticism that some senior executives are receiving high levels of pay and have conflicts of interest with their members' needs.⁴⁰

The Aged Veterans Fund is for all UK military personnel, not just nuclear veterans, but is being promoted in a way that absolves the UK Government of future responsibility for compensation for the nuclear testing program in Australia and Kiribati. It undercuts the call by Fijian and NZ veterans for recognition and compensation, as the NCCF does not cover overseas veterans. MP John Baron, who serves as NCCF Chair, told the UK House of Commons:

I stress that our proposals are different ... because the £25 million would be distributed on the basis of need, not entitlement. That is why it is important to stress the *ex gratia* nature of the payment. There is no admission of liability; no admission of guilt.⁴¹

Many surviving Christmas Island veterans and their families believe the UK Government is still avoiding its responsibility and denying their rights. Reflecting on Britain's colonial ties to Australia, New Zealand, Kiribati and Fiji, Paul Ah Poy states:

39 Interview with Tekoti Rotan, Suva, Fiji, November 2016.

40 'Charity bosses cash in', *Fissionline*, No. 44, May 2016. The glossy propaganda newsletter *Campaign* produced by the new BNTVA charity since 2012 is in sharp contrast to the small typed publications produced by most veterans' organisations. Copies of *Fissionline*, compiled by journalist Alan Rimmer, can be found online at: issuu.com/search?q=Fissionline.

41 John Baron MP, UK House of Commons, Hansard official report, 29 October 2013, col. 233WH.

Every time there was an emergency, our people would answer the call of our Queen. The troops would come back with a big parade, with medals and flags flying and the band would be playing. But with us Christmas Island veterans, we all sneaked home like a thief in the night. There was no medal and no band and we were told ‘don’t talk about it!’ We still remember we were healthy and young and we came back with a legacy that will be with us until the end of time.

To the government of Great Britain, the people of Great Britain, we would like to say, please, do what is right. We have done our duty to our Queen and our country. We can only wait and see, hopefully, that you will do something.⁴²

As he stood before the Christmas Island veterans in 2015 to remember 50 years of US, British and French nuclear testing across Oceania, Voreqe Bainimarama gave voice to sentiments that resonate across the islands region:

As one, the Pacific nations stand and say: ‘Never again.’ Just as we implore the industrialised nations now to stand with us in the battle against rising sea levels caused by the carbon emissions they cause, we also implore them to join us in our commitment to make the Pacific nuclear free.

At the height of the Cold War, there were up to 70,000 nuclear weapons in the hands of the Great Powers. Through successive treaties and agreements, this has now been whittled down to around 16,000 weapons. But it is still enough to destroy our planet and the world we live in many times over.

It is a form of madness that we in the Pacific—the ocean that takes its name from the word ‘peace’—find incomprehensible. This is why we will always be on the side of those nations pressing for the dismantling of the world’s nuclear arsenals.⁴³

In 2017, the 60th anniversary of the Grapple tests, non-nuclear states finalised the text of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which opened for signature on 20 September 2017. As we remember the legacies of Christmas Island and other test sites, the new treaty is a vital step in the ongoing challenge to create a world free of nuclear weapons.

42 Interview with Paul Ah Poy, Suva, Fiji, November 2016.

43 Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama: ‘Speech at the first payout to veterans of Operation Grapple’, media release, Office of the Prime Minister, Suva, Fiji, 30 January 2015.

This text is taken from *Grappling with the Bomb: Britain's Pacific H-bomb tests*, by Nic Maclellan, published 2017 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.