

Reggane: Africa's Hiroshima

In the years when Algeria was in pursuit of independence, coastal towns were fighting for their freedom, but there was a completely different atmosphere in the Saharan zone at the south of the country. Nuclear tests started by France in 1960 in Southern Algeria introduced the nuclear effect called radiation to its residents.

The desire to own nuclear technology that accelerated after World War II led France to new pursuits just like Britain. Nuclear activities started under Charles de Gaulle were aimed at providing France with the capability to compete with America, the Soviets, and Britain as soon as possible. The nuclear activities that firstly started in the Alps and then continued in Corsica were stopped due to the reactions of environmentalists. It was thus decided to transfer nuclear activities to Algeria. They would have no difficulties suppressing the reactions here as Algeria was still a colony of France in 1960.

French engineers moved the test laboratories to the Sahara. Thus the city of Reggane, which was located in the south of Algeria and had a population of nearly 40,000 people, became the first center of nuclear trials. About 150,000 people lived in the surrounding area.

The French test team then set up a military base at Hammoudia and transformed it into a small French town in an instant. Many technicians and engineers made it their home. The area circumscribed by the French for testing equated to about a fifth of France's total area. This region where radiation scattering continues even today suddenly gained a strategic importance for France. Billions of dollars were invested in a rural settlement where people were still grazing their herds and drawing water from wells.

On February 13, 1960, residents were shaken by a huge explosion and the accompanying glare. The shaking ground terrified the locals. While a large cloud of smoke rose up to the atmosphere, fear and panic spread. The French had successfully trialed their first atomic bomb coded " *Gerboise Bleue*". But while the 70-kiloton atomic bomb created a hollow the size of a crater, the radiation scattering that would last for years had only just begun.

After Reggane witnessed a total of four atmospheric trials, tests were moved to another location called In Ecker within the same region. A series of secret tests were conducted in In Ecker where underground laboratories were built. These trials continued in the Sahara until 1966. From 1960-1966, the French carried out 17 nuclear trials in the Sahara. During this time they assured the public that tests were being conducted under very secure conditions.

However, the truth revealed a short time ago shows that the French public was being misled about the radioactive effects of these nuclear trials. In 2010, the French newspaper *Le Parisien* published secret documents revealing that much larger areas than what had originally been stated were exposed to radioactive effect. In actual fact, the radioactive effect covered a very broad area reaching to Nigeria, Mali, Mauritania, Tunisia, Libya and even southern Europe. This large area has been subject to a radioactive particle scattering that causes serious harm to human health and the ecosystem.

As the villages and towns close to the test location were exposed to the effects more, several health issues soon emerged. The residents of Reggane genetically transmitted the radioactive effects to the next generations. But the negative effect was not only limited to people. Animal herds, water sources and plant species were also exposed to radioactive effect. Even the French who conducted the tests encountered problems such as infertility and cancer in their later lives.

These tests which continued persistently despite the reactions of African countries made France an important nuclear power and upgraded it to the league of states with nuclear weapons. The people of Reggane found themselves living in the Hiroshima of Africa, exposed for years to the effects of a bomb that they never produced, never owned, and probably will never see again in their lives. Passed down from generation to generation, this would go on to affect even the people who were not at the location of the incident for years into the future.