They live in nuclear 'darkness'

Still no answers after 19 years

PALOMARES, Spain (Reuter) — Two decades after a bizarre accident when three nuclear bombs fell — but failed to explode — on this Mediterranean hamlet, the villagers of Palomares still fear they are being kept in the dark.

The sleepy backwater entered the 20th century with a jolt in January 1966 when a U.S. Air Force bomber and a refueling plane collided in mid-air, dropping three hydrogen bombs on the village. A fourth bomb fell into the sea.

Spain's Nuclear Energy Board has now finally given the villagers a clean bill of health. But after waiting nearly 20 years, the people of Palomares are suspicious of official findings and are pressing for an independent inquiry.

"We have been kept in the dark for too long," Mayor Antonia Flores told Reuters. "Until an independent commission studies our medical history, our hearts will not be at rest."

The bombs' inbuilt safety devices prevented a nuclear explosion that could have obliterated most of southern Spain, but the impact of the collision caused a shower of radioactive plutonium and uranium to fall over the village, 125 miles south of Alicante.

The bewildered villagers were not informed for three days that the bombs were nuclear weapons.

"I was out in the fields when we heard a thunderous explosion," recalled Antonio Gonzalez, now a white-haired village elder. "We looked up into the sky and saw black and red fire and molten metal falling upon us," he said.

Bomb in back yard

"We thought the world was coming to an end," recalled Mayor Flores, who was a girl of 6 at the time of the accident.

"One of the bombs made a huge crater in our back yard. We played with the debris until they told us it was dangerous," she said.

Despite the huge cleanup operation undertaken by the U.S. Air Force — burning crops, killing animals and removing 2,000 tons of contaminated topsoil — the villagers were told by American and Spanish doctors that they were in no danger from the plutonium.

"We were told to burn our clothes and take showers," Isabel Portillo remembers. "I scrubbed my children . . . but I couldn't afford to burn our clothes," she said.

The villagers say they were treated like lepers for many years and nobody would buy their crops, while the Nuclear Energy Board shrouded the investigations in secrecy.

Last month, nuclear physicist Francisco Mingot broke the Board's 20-year silence to assure more than 500 people packed into Palomares' town hall that there was no health hazard in the residual amount of plutonium remaining in the environment.

The presence of Nuclear Energy Board scientists in Palomares marked a personal triumph for Flores, who led a two-year campaign for the villagers' right to know the results of radiation tests conducted on them over the years.

'Below danger levels'

"We have detected plutonium in 10 per cent of the population, but these are well below danger levels," Mingot told Reuters.

"One would have to eat thousands of tons of local produce before the risk from radioactivity became serious," he added.

Dr. Eduardo Rodriguez Farre, a senior researcher at the Scientific Institute in Barcelona and a member of Palomares' independent medical commission, contests the Nuclear Energy Board's findings.

"Plutonium is one of the most toxic substances known to man," he told Reuters. "I find it inconceivable that the board should say otherwise."

Farre said that once plutonium comes into contact with the air, it forms a compound with oxygen which is deposited in the lungs, bones and liver when inhaled.

He said cancer was the most common consequence of plutonium poisoning, but could take 15 to 30 years to develop.

"We are currently looking for funds to conduct our own environmental tests," said Farre. "This is the worst case of plutonium contamination known in the world and not one study of the disaster has been published in Spain."

Farre said the U.S. Air Force had conducted its own research and financed the Nuclear Energy Board's work, but the results were classified military secrets.