

Bad Times Blamed on

By Robert Toth
Los Angeles Times

PALOMARES, Spain—This poor village on the Mediterranean has housed Phoenecians, Romans, Carthaginians and Moors in its time. But it is not sure it will survive the Americans and their hydrogen bombs, which fell from a blue sky three years ago.

"Since the accident the crops do not grow, the water has turned bad and the people are leaving Palomares," said Conchita Fernandez de Arellano, a school mistress, last week. "It really is quite bad" she continued. "In a few years there will be no one left."

That is an exaggeration. But there is no doubt that Palomares' fortunes have turned sour since Jan. 17, 1966.

That morning an American B-52 bomber rammed a jet tanker while refueling six miles overhead. Flaming kerosene, living and incinerated men, pieces of aircraft and four unarmed hydrogen bombs fell in and near the town. But not one of the 2000 residents died or was hurt.

There was no nuclear explosion, but two of the bomb casings cracked after their triggering charges went off on impact with the ground. Plutonium was vaporized by the explosions and escaped in dark clouds of toxic and radioactive particles, which fell on the tomato, alfalfa, bean and wheat crops.

U.S. Promise

When the vast cleanup task began, American officials promised that, "we will leave Palomares uncontaminated like we found it." They tried. To some extent they succeeded.

All crops were bought up. About 1750 tons of the most radioactive topsoil was flown to the United States for burial and new topsoil was

Palomares' H-Bombs

laid in its place. And all of the remaining "hot" farmland, eight acres, was deep plowed to cover the plutonium with ten to 18 inches of dirt, under which it became radiologically and biologically harmless to animals and vegetables, according to

"The Bombs of Palomares" by Tad Szulc.

"I am very satisfied and I repeat one more time," said the president of Spain's nuclear energy board a few months ago, "that the results of our tests show not the slightest danger of contamination."

No person was found immediately after the accident nor subsequently to have inhaled or ingested plutonium in any measurable quantity nor to have in any way been injured by radiation. There is always a possibility of cancer later, so residents will have up to 30 years to file claims for compensation in this respect. In that time any malignancy should have appeared.

'More Than Fair'

In the end American officials said the Spanish government had complimented the United States for being "more than fair" to Palomares. But the land is virtually fallow.

Everyone agrees that this is because the town's deep wells, from which is drawn all the irrigation water used in this area of perpetual drought, have become too

brackish.

It is hard to see how the accident could have caused the well water to change. In fact, Spanish farm experts insist that the wells had been slowly getting more saline for years before the accident.

But the people of Palomares are dubious. Certainly there was no visible trouble with the crops before the bombs, they say. Tomatoes were big and juicy, a favorite on foreign markets. Six million pounds were sold in 1965, bringing in \$250,000, which is a lot of money in Almeria, the poorest province of Spain.

The bombs could have contributed to the brackishness indirectly, however. The deep plowing might have turned up shallow salt deposits or brought up soil that had been steeping in salt.

Little Grows

Whatever the cause, agriculture has practically ceased here. Residents have taken increasingly to raising pigs and cows to live and some find work on farms outside the village.

Eighteen or twenty families, or about 10 per cent of the total in the village, are said to have emigrated from Palomares in the three years since the bombs fell, and young men and women from the town have gone abroad in large numbers to find work and send money home.

Villagers appear less resentful of the well water going bad — perhaps because

they accept it as an act of God — than of alleged American and Spanish tight-fistedness in paying claims.

A total of 644 claims were submitted, for a total of \$7,839,000. One of these was for \$5 million, but it has been taken to admiralty court by the claimant, Francisco Simo Orts, a fishing boat captain whose sightings aided in the recovery of one bomb, which fell into the sea.

Of the other claims 1528 were settled for a total of \$712,000. Ninety-eight claims were rejected and 11 are still pending.

Palomares contends it got only one third of the funds paid out, while the rest al-

legedly went to undeserving residents of adjacent villages who duped the Americans.

The schoolmistress, Mrs. Fernandez, had her claim for \$633 for lost tuition at her private school rejected despite some persuasive evidence that parents refused to send their children for many weeks.

"Some got money, but some did not" summed up

wized Jesus Navarro. "I would say the Americans have treated us well. If something is not right, it is not their fault." He refused to say whose fault it might be.

Clearly, however, the blame is aimed at Spanish authorities. "We're not Spaniards to them," said one villager, "we're Africans." He attributed it to the fact that this region was on "the

wrong side in the Civil War."

The claims were decided primarily by a Spanish military judge aided by two agronomists from this province. But there were so many complaints against their tight-fisted rulings that American officials at one point increased every approved claim by 27 per cent.

The U.S. obviously feels it has not done enough. It has

offered \$150,000 desalination plant to make drinking water from the sea for Palomares and the neighboring Villaricos.

The Spanish government, however, asked that it join in making a larger plant for five villages in the area and the project has been delayed as a result. It may turn out that the plant will not be situated in Palomares.