

France Defends Test Plans As Nuclear Protests Build

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PARIS, Sept. 3—France prepared today to embark on a controversial series of nuclear tests, despite protests at home and abroad that President Jacques Chirac and other officials have denounced as a plot to undermine France's role as a global military power.

Following a nerve-jangling weekend that included a brief hijacking, last-ditch appeals from angry foreign governments and the arrest of 260 people at a banned rally in Paris, French officials said tonight that the final countdown had begun for the first in a series of up to eight nuclear blasts, which will take place in the South Pacific sometime this week.

The initial test had been expected to take place this weekend after French Navy commandos cleared a 12-mile exclusion zone around the Mururoa coral atoll by seizing two ships operated by the Greenpeace environmental group and expelling dozens of handcuffed passengers to Papeete, Tahiti, about 750 miles away. Commandos today seized a third ship in the exclusion zone, the Reuter news agency reported.

But French officials said the government heeded an appeal by the United States to postpone the test while President Clinton was attending ceremonies in Hawaii this weekend marking the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in the Pacific. U.S. officials reportedly warned the French that Clinton would be compelled to make a public condemnation of the nuclear blasts if one was ignited while he was in the Pacific region.

Meanwhile, a 33-year-old Spaniard briefly hijacked a French airliner today with nearly 300 passengers and crew members aboard and threatened to blow it up in an apparent protest against the planned nuclear tests.

The Air Inter plane, flying to Paris from the Spanish resort of Palma de Majorca, was diverted to Geneva when the hijacker handed a note to a stewardess denouncing the nuclear tests. He brandished what he said was a remote-controlled detonator that later turned out to be a mobile telephone with a few batteries taped to the outside.

All passengers were released unharmed after an hour on the ground. The hijacker then gave himself up after two members of the airport security squad entered the aircraft.

"It seems to have been an isolated act by an unbalanced person," Jean-Philippe Maitre, the Geneva airport director, said. "The person in question showed quite quickly that his objective was not to cause the passengers any problems."

In the South Pacific, thousands of protesters, including dozens of foreign lawmakers and survivors of the Hiroshima nuclear blast, marched through the streets of Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia, as part of a last-ditch campaign to persuade the French government to abandon plans for eight nuclear blasts in the next eight months.

"It is not too late for President Chirac to turn back from nuclear testing. Nuclear weapons are a relic from a previous era," said Japanese Finance Minister Masayoshi Takemura, who led a delegation of 24 Japanese legislators to take part in the Tahiti protests.

Japan, Australia and New Zealand have stepped up their campaign against France's testing plans in recent weeks. Australia has barred French companies from competing for government contracts and offered to subsidize protest trips by politicians and dignitaries.

New Zealand announced today that it would send an air force rescue plane Monday to parachute spare parts to the Fiji protest ship Kaunitoni, which stalled in the Pacific Ocean this weekend while carrying lawmakers and journalists from 12 countries to the blast site.

In several Asian and Pacific countries, a growing consumer boycott of French products has provoked enough of a decline in the sales of French wine, perfume and clothing imports to lead some French industrialists to express anxiety to the government about the potential commercial cost of pursuing the tests.

The U.S. government, while expressing regret over the French decision to resume nuclear tests, has muffled its displeasure in the interest of sustaining a close working relationship with Chirac on other issues, such as Bosnia. German Chancellor Helmut Kohl also has minimized any public signs of dismay at Germany's most important neighbor in spite of agitation by a powerful anti-nuclear lobby.

Many of France's other European partners, however, have not flinched from voicing criticism of what some view as an arrogant disregard of international opinion. To the annoyance of the French government, seven of the European Union's 15 members have lodged official protests demanding the abolition of all nuclear tests.

In turn, Chirac has told his fellow European leaders that the nuclear tests are necessary to protect the future strategic interests of the European Union, and not just those of France.

"We are prepared to place our force in the service of Europe," Chirac said in an interview with a French newsmagazine. "A reliable and credible French nuclear deterrent can be an important asset for European defense."