International team campaigns against nuclear testing in Africa (Sahara Protest) 1959-1960

- included innovative organizational forms/communication forms [1]
- included participation by more than one social class [2]

Timing
Time period notes:
Although there was much organizing against the tests in Africa prior to December 6, 1959, that date marked the first action by the Sahara Protest Team.
6 December 1959 to: 17 January 1960

Location and Goals
Country: Ghana
Country: Algeria
Location City/State/Province: Accra
Location Description: Accra, Ghana was the base of operations for the Sahara Protest Team
Goals: “...to arouse the conscience of the French people and the people of other nuclear powers; to stimulate further active opposition in Africa; and to halt the bomb tests—or at least to embarrass the French government” (DAC, April Carter)

Methods
Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 029. Symbolic reclamations-travel to occupy testing site
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
• 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 2nd segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 029. Symbolic reclamations•travel to occupy testing site
• 034. Vigils
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 3rd segment:

• 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 4th segment:

• 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 5th segment:

• 029. Symbolic reclamations•travel to occupy testing site
• 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 6th segment:

• 029. Symbolic reclamations•travel to occupy testing site
• 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 006. Group or mass petitions
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 016. Picketing
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Segment Length:
Approximately 1 week

Classifications
Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Environment
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity
Peace
Group characterization:

- African nationalists
- anti-nuclear activists
- civil rights workers
- pacifists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites
Leaders:
Bill Sutherland, Michael Randle, A.J. Muste, Bayard Rustin
Partners:
Direct Action Committee (DAC), Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA), Council for Nuclear Disarmament (CND)
External allies:
Ghana leading political party Cooperative People's Party,
Involvement of social elites:
Kwame Nkrumah

Joining/exiting order of social groups
Groups in 1st Segment:

- CND
- CNVA
- DAC

Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length:
Approximately 1 week

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence
Opponents:
French government
Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known
Campaigner violence:
Not known
Repressive Violence:
Armed French military arrested the campaigners multiple times and had them deported
Success Outcome
Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
2 points out of 6 points
Survival:
1 point out of 1 points
Growth:
2 points out of 3 points
Total points:
5 out of 10 points
Notes on outcomes:
The Sahara Protest Team was not able to enter the test site or prevent the French from conducting the bomb tests, although it is praised for bringing greater attention to nonviolent action in Africa.

In the summer of 1959, the French government announced plans for a test of the first French atomic bomb in the Sahara in Reggan, Algeria, to support its military and political powers. Also at the time, Algeria was engaged in a war of independence from France. African leaders and organizations protested almost unanimously against nuclear testing in the Sahara and became concerned with the dangers of nuclear fallout in their country as well as France’s colonialist attitude. There was also fear that testing would exacerbate world tensions and raise the risk of war, allowing powerful nations to ignore the concerns of other peoples. Therefore, many African nations favored disarmament and banning of nuclear weapons.

In August of 1959, African-American civil rights and anti-war activist Bill Sutherland helped launch the Ghana Council for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) with strong support from public figures and organizations in the country, including the Ghana Federation of Women, the Ghana Bar Association, and the Ghana Medical Association. It also received support from Agbeli Gbedemah, the minister of finance and president of World Association of World Federalists.

In 1959, The British Direct Action Committee (DAC) began organizing an international protest team to visit the test site and raise resistance against the bomb tests. The team composed of international pacifists would attempt to travel to and occupy the test site, with hopes of challenging or preventing the French initiative. Their goal was to raise awareness in France and other nuclear powers to the dangers of nuclear testing, organize active opposition in Africa, and embarrass the French government and pressure it to stop bomb tests.

Although the shortest path to Algeria would be through Morocco, the team decided that the route would be too dangerous because it was heavily patrolled by French paratroops. Furthermore, the group wanted to avoid Morocco and any association with the National Liberation Front (FLN) from Algeria.

The Sahara Protest Team decided that Ghana would be the best site to build a base, because there was a general anti-French movement for the war in Algeria as well as because of mistreatment of Guinea during its independence. Furthermore, the new government of Kwame Nkrumah promised an agenda of anti-imperialism and anti-militarism. DAC joined with the United States’ Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA) and traveled to Accra to plan with the CND. Several famous Western pacifists joined the campaign, including Michael Randle, A.J. Muste, and Bayard Rustin. Randle was the chair of the Direct Action Committee against Unclear War, Muste was a founder of the American Committee on Africa, and Rustin was an experienced activist who helped organize the Montgomery Bus Boycott.
The group received mass support from Ghana’s ruling political party, the Convention People’s Party, and held meetings in Ghana with tens of thousands of supporters. The group held public fundraisers through Radio Ghana as well as through public rallies. Reverend Michael Scott, a well known anti-colonial peace activist, also joined the campaign and the churches held a day of prayer for nuclear disarmament on October 18. In November, the group addressed the All-African Trade Union Federation and received official backing on their venture. The secretary of the Federation encouraged all African workers to join in demonstrations against the French nuclear tests. However, the French government denied visas and entry permits to all team members when they applied for travel documentation.

On December 6, 1959, the Sahara Protest Team of 19 members (2 from the U.S., 3 Britons, a Frenchwoman, 11 from Ghana, and one each from Nigeria and Basutoland) used two land rovers and a truck to begin traveling the 2,100 miles to Algeria. Their journey was met by immediate media attention and public support.

However, three days later armed French soldiers blocked the group inside French Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) and the team was forced to withdraw after traveling 16 miles beyond the border. On December 9, the War Resisters League (WRL) staged a poster walk in the United States to the French Mission in New York City to display solidarity with the Sahara Protest Project.

After regrouping, a smaller reconfigured team attempted to enter Upper Volta again on December 17, but they were again barred by French troops 11 miles from the border. On this second attempt, the team staged a sit-in at the barrier and refused to move their vehicles from the road. They began to hold vigils, distribute leaflets urging resistance to nuclear testing, and broadcasted through loudspeakers to the local residents despite threats of arrest from the French police. The group distributed forty thousand leaflets printed in local languages with the slogans, “People of Africa! Africa is in danger!” and encouraged nonviolent resistance.

On January 8, 1960, four of the Sahara Protest Team members started to journey to the testing site on foot, but they were arrested by armed troops. The French troops impounded the vehicles and returned the team to Ghana. The team staged a third final protest march on January 17 by walking on foot and taking rides with sympathetic truck drivers until they were stopped by French authorities 66 miles north of the border.

After this setback, the group found that most of team members had been scattered and many were threatened with or had been deported. Furthermore, most of their equipment was confiscated and all routes into Upper Volta were under tight surveillance by French troops. The protesters finally decided to give up on the project.

People began holding small demonstrations including fasts, picketing, and leafleting around Upper Volta, Ghana, Nigeria, Britain, West Germany, and the USA. Opposition to nuclear testing also organized mass demonstrations in Tunis on January 25 and in Tripoli on January 31 of 1960. In Rabat, Morocco, about 2,000 people protested outside of the French embassy despite a ban put on public demonstrations. In Paris, 500 African students sent a petition against nuclear testing to Premier Michel Debre.

Despite international protests, the French detonated their first nuclear device on February 13, 1960, and then again on April 1. International outcry spread against France’s disregard of African interests. CND denounced the French for exploding the bomb and pledged to use nonviolent action to raise opposition in Africa. Scott and Nkrumah organized a conference for peace activism from April 7-9, 1960, called the Conference on Positive Action for Peace and Security in Africa. In a unanimous vote, the conference praised the Sahara Protest Team for its contribution to the African liberation struggle and pledged to establish nonviolent training centers.

The impact of the Sahara Protest Team varied in its different objectives. Support and publicity in France was a failure, especially because of the political situation in France from de Gaulle where resistance to nationalist...
policies was very discouraged. Coverage in the US was also poor and the team never became a major news story in Britain. However, the campaign had a significant impact on Ghana and opposition parties in Africa.

Many pacifists saw the International Sahara Protest Team as the prototype of a world peace army, and praised the project for bringing awareness of nonviolent philosophy and strategy to Africa. The project signified cooperation between European anti-nuclear groups, African liberation forces, and the U.S. civil rights movement (in which Sutherland and Rustin were involved) into a campaign supported by the government of Ghana.

**Research Notes**

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Nancy Liu, 05/12/2011

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