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Nuclear tragedy at Thule

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It was 21 January 1968, and the local time was 16:00. HOB0 28, was on a secret 24-hour mission over the arctic region, and had been supplied with fuel in the air less than an hour ago. The second pilot was ordered back to take a rest. The reserve pilot took over his place. A few minutes later, a crewmember reported that he could smell burnt rubber. The chief pilot ordered oxygen masks on and asked the navigator to find out what was wrong. He came back without having discovered anything. "Look one more time," came the order. He moved a metal case and found fire. Two fire extinguishers were emptied without much result.

The chief pilot called Thule Air Base: REQUEST PERMISSION FOR AN EMERGENCY LANDING.

Two minutes later he prepared an approach. At the same time the light went out.

"Bailout," he commanded immediately. "Jump!"

Six used the ejection seats. The seventh was sentenced to death. The huge B-52 bomber was outfitted with electronic equipment such that there was no place for a seventh ejection seat. NR. 7 sprang anyway, but his head was crushed in the crashing plane.

At 16:39, the sirens wailed over Thule AB, but it was a signal that one only knew from practice: atom-alarm. Seconds later, a massive bang was heard out on the ice of Northstar Bay.

Several-hundred-meters-high, orange-yellow flames lit up the polar night. At the base, they knew what it was. They had seen it on film: burning hydrogen bombs. **1**

In 1968, a B-52 bomber carrying four 1.1-megaton bombs crashed on the ice 19 kilometers (12 miles) from Thule, leaking radioactive plutonium contamination into Kalaallit Nunaat's waters. Reports of cancer and other illnesses surfaced among Danish and Kalaallit Thule Air Base workers. In 1995, the Danish government paid a \$15.5 million settlement to the 1,700 workers who had been exposed to radiation following the 1968 crash. In 1991, Danish researchers also found levels of plutonium in shellfish up to 1,000 times higher than precrash levels. **2** According to William Arkin, the US as recently as 1999 still stationed nuclear weapons in Kalaallit Nunaat. **3**

The Pentagon made a risible attempt at concealing the nuclear blunder, even to the extent of one Official stating: "I don't know of any missing bomb, but we have not positively identified what I think you are looking for."

Some Danish workers involved in the cleanup effort contracted various ailments such as cancers but were refused assistance by the US. **4**

Many people, including former Thule Air Base workers and Danish parliamentarians, state that an unexploded American hydrogen bomb also disappeared - serial number 78252. Niels-Jørgen Nehring, head of the state-sponsored DUPI [Danish Institute of International Affairs now called the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS)], gave credence to Jyllands-Posten's claim that a lost bomb remained off Thule. Said Nehring to Reuters, "It is not new information that there might be some stuff left there," a few kilometers off the coast, where the depth reaches 250-300 meters (820-984 feet). **5**

Whether or not Danish prime minister H.C. Hansen approved the deployment of nuclear weapons in Kalaallit Nunaat in 1957 has been the subject of much conjecture in Denmark. Svend Aage Christensen - one of the authors of a

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highly publicized Danish government report on the issue in 1997 - stated that Hansen's concession was made under conditions of secrecy. This reduced pressure from the Soviet Union over western bases on Danish territory and it also helped Hansen avoid a public debate about the new nuclear policy at a time when it was not popular.

On the one hand, very few people had direct knowledge of the storage of American nuclear weapons in Greenland or of nuclear overflights over the island. On the other hand, a large government circle suspected what was going on. From 1959 to 1965, the Americans stationed NIKE surface-to-air missiles with nuclear warheads in Greenland. **6**

Following the nuclear catastrophe at Thule, the Danish government forbade the storage of nuclear weapons and overflights with nuclear weapons without its permission.

"On the other hand, DUPI's analysis didn't mention whether the Danish attitude toward nuclear weapons would be respected or wished respect on the question of foreign ships calling at Danish, and after 1968, Greenlandic harbors."

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The calls for an in-depth investigation were deflected. This came up against the sensitivity of US security concerns. The US policy was stonewalling: "neither confirm, nor deny." **8**

In 1961, American officials denied having transported nuclear weapons to Kalaallit Nunaat. But Denmark sought assurance and came up with the wording: "American authorities were informed of Denmark's nuclear policy and we have been assured that American ships to visit Danish ports respect this policy." The wording "we have been assured" was rejected by US embassy officials and was attenuated to "and we presume."

Substantively, implicit in the alteration, it can be summed up that the final formulation does not prevent American warships with nuclear weapons onboard from calling at Kalaallit Nunaat's harbors, which the original Danish draft had made problematic. It was problematic because of the US policy of "neither confirm, nor deny."

Danish ambassador to the US Henrik Kauffmann's negotiation of the 1951 Defense Agreement on Greenland has bound Denmark indeterminately. A significant passage was inserted in article X:

"The present agreement shall continue in force until there is agreement that the present danger for peace and security of the Americas has ceased." An American evacuation of Greenland became in this way linked with great uncertainty as this passage could be interpreted with great leeway. **9**

Even though Kauffmann had been in Denmark many times during the summer of 1945, he had never broached the subject of a US demand for a base in Kalaallit Nunaat until 22 October. The poorly negotiated treaty went against "Danish interests at that period in time" and was a problem for Danish security and foreign policy, and also Kauffmann's career. **10**

The Military Significance of Thule Air Base

In an important 1997 study commissioned by the Danish government, years of US pressure to gain these rights were described as "a classic clash between a great power and a small state." Denmark had legal arguments on its side but lacked the political and military power to prevail. The US wanted Thule as a staging base for nuclear bombers because of the region's proximity to the Soviet Union. Denmark tried to hide this purpose by talking about the common defense of Kalaallit Nunaat.

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Thule Air Base is the northernmost base of the US Air Force, located 1119 kilometers (695 miles) north of the Arctic Circle on the northwest side of Kalaallit Nunaat. Now the 821st Air Base Group, which has responsibility for air base support within the Thule Defence Area, occupies the major military base. The base also hosts the 12th Space Warning Squadron, a ballistic missile early warning site designed to detect and track intercontinental ballistic missiles launched against Turtle Island. It is one of, according to greatly understated Pentagon figures, over 700 overseas military bases that garrison the globe in about 130 countries from Kalaallit Nunaat to Antarctica, from Qatar on the Arabian Peninsula to Okinawa in Japan. There are another 6,000 bases in the United States and its territories. **11**

The website of the 821st Air Base Group in Thule informs that it is one unit of 16 sensors the 21st Space Wing operates around the world to provide missile warning and space surveillance information to North American Aerospace Defense (NORAD) command centers in Colorado. Thule is also host to Detachment 3 of the 22nd Space Operations Squadron, part of the 50th Space Wing's global satellite control network. In addition, the modern aerodrome oversees a 3,000-meter runway and 2,600 US and international flights per year.¹² Some 1,000 US and non-US personnel are stationed there.

What the website fails to mention is that the Thule Air Base precipitated the ethnic cleansing of the Inuit hunting village of Uummannaq. Thus, in deference to hyper-imperial whim, colonial Danish authorities illegally expelled and forcibly exiled 650 Inuit in May 1953 - just a few days before 5 June 1953 when they became Danish citizens through an amendment to the Danish constitution - from Uummannaq, Pituffik, and neighboring locales to a tent community 125 kilometers north in Qaanaaq, away from their ancestral lands. "They were given four days to abandon a home that had been theirs for almost 4,000 years. They have never been allowed back," wrote Jørgen Dragsdahl. **13**

High court judge Per Walsøe, who earlier was the lawyer for the displaced Inuit residents of Thule, stated that the Inuit residents were warned that if they took longer than four days to vacate, they were threatened with loss of a replacement house in Qaanaaq. Nonetheless, they had to make do with tents the first half-year until the houses were ready.

The Danish colonial rulers and the Pentagon viewed the "backward" Kalaallit as stymieing Euro-American progress. The book details early secret documents about how Danish authorities tried to convince the Danish public that the move occurred by free choice. **14**

The ethnically cleansed Inuit, one of the smallest indigenous groups in the world, have persistently fought to regain their land from the Americans for over fifty years. In August 1999, the surviving 53 people, known as the "Hingitaq 53," of those relocated won a Danish High Court ruling. Declaring that their removal had been "an unlawful violation done to the population of Uummannaq ... [and] contrary to the actual facts," the Court established the fact that the territory belonging to the indigenous people of Thule had been illegally expropriated in 1953 without proper legislation and compensation as required by the Danish constitution; but it denied the Hingitaq 53 the right of return. It upheld the US-Danish military agreement, made in colonial times and found "no evidence to prove that Thule Air Base is illegally established." The Danish Court upheld US military and colonial "right" over indigenous right: if the Inuit were given their full rights, the Danish government would "be obliged to demand the base to be dismantled."

The Danish High Court further provided that the former residents would receive 17,000 Danish kroner each for their expulsion, as well as collective damages of 500,000 kroner. Half a century after the ethnic cleansing, the Kalaallit would not accept such miniscule compensation from colonial justice.

The Hingitaq 53 demanded 235 million Danish kroner for lost hunting possibilities in their former territory for the last half-century. The victims of colonization were required to appeal to the colonial court system for justice, and hardly surprising, the court's findings were unfavourable for the Kalaallit. The Danish Supreme Court's verdict backed the Danish High Court's ruling. It concluded "that both the intervention in 1951 in the access to hunting and fishing and

the intervention in 1953 on relocation of the settlement were legal and valid." Therefore, it decreed additional compensation was not required. **15**

Foreseeing the Supreme Court decision against the Hingitaaq 53, Kalaallit Nunaat MP Aqqaluk Lynge warned that a cultural genocide was imminent. "If the Court rules against their desire, their need and right to return to the land which can sustain them, the Kalaallit will, in all likelihood, join other indigenous peoples globally whose language, culture and presence are no longer with us."

Ultimately the Kalaallit wish the US military base closed; realistically they hope for a compromise. After all, mused Lynge, "Which nation ever managed to close down a US base?" **16**

While the state of Denmark might have won a domestic judicial victory over its colony, a moral victory eludes Denmark. The right-of-return of indigenous peoples is a fundamental human right under international law. The Danish Supreme Court ruling also flies in the face of an international resolution in support of Hingitaaq 53 reached in the United Nations Commission on Human Rights by 200 representatives of indigenous peoples. **17**

The Original Peoples of Kalaallit Nunaat were egregiously forced to seek redress in the undeniably biased setting of a colonial court. Further problems with limited self-rule in Kalaallit Nunaat became apparent when discussions began on an upgrade of the Thule Air Base.

US Ballistic Missile Defence: "an imperialistic policy" and "highway to hell"

In December 2002, the US formally requested that Denmark consider allowing the upgrade of the US radar site in Thule for use in "ballistic missile defense" (BMD). Negotiations on upgrading Thule, involved both Denmark and the Kalaallit Nunaat home rule government. Foreign Affairs Canada considered that upgrading the Thule Air Base "would not imply the participation of Denmark itself in the US BMD system." **18**

Citizens of Kalaallit Nunaat expressed concern. In a 2001 report, a BBC correspondent quoted a young father in the capital of Nuuk: "If a war begins, you know all the missiles will begin to rain over us. Greenland will pay the highest price."

"The Thule airbase is here," he said, pointing to a map. "And this is the radar system connected to Fylingdales in the U.K. and the base in Alaska."

"This is the shield the Americans want to build - and this here is the missile highway to hell - west Greenland." A student added, "It's an imperialistic policy only in the interests of the West." The BBC matter-of-factly noted, "In effect, the Thule airbase is US territory - with state-of-the-art radar and satellite tracking equipment, which would be upgraded under the US plan." **19**

Despite the strong sentiments in opposition to BMD, on 19 May 2004, Kalaallit Nunaat, Denmark, and the US reached a memorandum-of-understanding to revise the 1951 US-Denmark Defense Agreement. US secretary-of-state Colin Powell and Danish foreign minister Per Stig Møller formally signed the agreement on 6 August at the US Air Base in Thule, an event scarcely reported in the corporate Turtle Island media. **20**

The Nunatsiaq News interpreted this news to mean: "it's now highly unlikely that a BMD site will be built in Nunavut or anywhere else in northern Canada." **21** Canada's possible role in BMD supposedly became moot when the minority Liberal government publicly backed out in the face of Canadian voter opposition. **22** However, Canadian

government denials to the contrary, Canadian participation in BMD has been depicted as a *fait accompli*. **23**

The government of Kalaallit Nunaat sought direct compensation for an upgrade of Thule's radar, but when it became clear that the US would not pay cash, the government settled for the right to pursue legal measures against US military who violate the Kalaallit Nunaat's criminal laws. Mikaela Engel, Kalaallit Nunaat's deputy minister of foreign affairs told Nunatsiaq News: "It's a decent and modern solution to a problem that's been nagging us since 1951."

Media have portrayed the deal as a victory acceptable to most of the political factions in Kalaallit Nunaat. Former prime minister Josef Motzfeldt, now the head of Kalaallit Nunaat's left-wing Inuit Ataqatigiit Party, said, "We are happy with the result of this agreement-in-principle."

"Now Greenland can participate, not only with respect to the Thule Air Base, but also with respect to other issues."

However, this spirit of accommodation isn't unanimous. Per Berthelsen, leader of the Demokratiit Party, does not consider the deal as a go-ahead to upgrade the Thule Air Base. Berthelsen said, "I realize that the Danish media has misunderstood that point and sees this agreement as saying 'yes' to missile defence, but it's not like that." **24**

In essence, Kalaallit Nunaat's right to determine the course of BMD on its territory, according to the US-Danish agreement, is limited to the US having to "consult with and inform" Kalaallit Nunaat and Denmark prior to future significant changes at the Thule Air Base. This was revealed by Colin Powell's statement: "The word I think in the treaty, as you say, is 'consult,' and that's what we would do."

When pressed on whether "consult" meant not having to ask the Kalaallit Nunaat government, Powell answered matter-of-factly: "Consult means consult." **25** Such is the content of what Powell called the US' new "family of bases."

A US\$260 million upgrade of Thule's radar facilities began in 2005. **26** Powell did not rule out the possibility of putting missiles at Thule.

Powell did nix an environmental cleanup of US bases, saying the responsibility had been transferred to Kalaallit Nunaat where it would stay.

Kalaallit Nunaat deputy foreign minister Michaela Engel had declared that the agreement would give Greenland the explicit right to veto further upgrades to the base.

"It would have been fine if we could have squeezed a little more out of the United States but we were not in a position to do that and I think we need to be content with what we've got here. And I think there's a broad agreement in Greenland and Denmark that we've gotten the best that we could get," she said.

Motzfeldt said, "The future of a country depends on its ability to leave behind the past without forgetting it - and to look forward without being naïve."

Motzfeldt has staked out a pro-BMD position for Kalaallit Nunaat. "Why should we be against defending ourselves against missiles?" he asked, ostensibly without considering why missiles might be fired at Kalaallit Nunaat. **27**

In April 2001, US deputy assistant secretary-of-state for Strategic Affairs Lucas Fischer called Thule a "unique asset" because of its strategic location that facilitates "good radar." Fischer felt that "most experts probably agree with me"

that Thule-type ground-based radars are paramount to a US missile defense system. Despite this, Clinton administration officials while preserving cordial relationships with key figures in Kalaallit Nunaat, played off Kalaallit Nunaat against Canada on the possibility of moving the entire Thule Air Base, a move that threatened the loss of US money. **28**

Canada, like Kalaallit Nunaat, has been the scene of nuclear deception by the US. Almon Scott, now 65, and allegedly weakened through exposure to nuclear radiation, worked as a guard at the Argentia, Newfoundland military base between 1963 and 1965. There, he claims, that he guarded nuclear weapons at a secret weapons lab in Placentia Bay without Canadian government approval. **29**

Imperialism and neo-colonialism provides the basis for the looming clipping of the colonial strings between Kalaallit Nunaat and Denmark. No area of the globe can stand aside from the violent global struggle for geo-political influence and resources in the twenty-first century.

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2. S. Fritz, Excerpts from M.A. thesis based largely on the research of journalist Kory Cappoza, "Thule: Greenland's Role in Missile Defense."
3. Judith Miller, "US Once Deployed 12,000 Nuclear Weapons in 2 Dozen Nations," *New York Times*, 19 October 1999.
4. Jeffrey St. Clair, *Been Brown So Long It Looked Like Green To Me* (Common Courage Press, 2004), 315-316.
5. Peter Starck, "Lost US Nuclear Bomb Near Planned NMD Radar?" *Nuclear News*, 13 August 2000.
6. Valur Ingimundarson, "Between Solidarity and Neutrality: The Nordic Countries and the Cold War, 1945-91," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 11, 1998, 269-74.
7. Translated from Thorsten Borring Olesen, "Spørgsmålet om atombevæbnede skibe anløb af danske havne: USS Wasp I København sommeren 1969," History Department, University of Aarhus.
8. Hans M. Christiansen, "The Neither Conform Nor Deny Policy: Nuclear Diplomacy at Work," *The Nuclear Information Project*, August 2004.
9. Translated from Claus Mikkelsen, "Henrik Kaufmann - den danske gesandt i Washington og Grønlandstraktaten af 1941," Claus Mikkelsen.dk.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, "Base Structure Report," Department of Defense, fiscal year 2003 baseline. Chalmers Johnson has since updated the number of US military bases abroad to 737. In "737 U.S. Military Bases = Global Empire," *AlterNet*, 19 February 2007.
12. "821st Air Base Group"

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13. Jørgen Dragsdahl, "The Danish dilemma," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, September/October 2001. The ethnic cleansing at Qaanaaq was a precursor to the subsequent ethnic cleansing of the indigenous Ilois from the erstwhile pristine coral atoll, Diego Garcia, in the Chagos archipelago by British and American governments to construct one of the largest US military bases outside the US (see Charles Judson Harwood Jr., "Diego Garcia: The 'criminal question' doctrine," updated 16 June 2006). See also John Pilger's documentary Stealing a Nation.
14. Knut Vidar Paulsen, "Thule-saken - urfolk og menneskerettigheter," Norges Fredsråd.
15. Transcript of Danish Supreme Court Comments on Hingitaq 53, Inuit Circumpolar Council.
16. Malcolm Brabant, "Inuit battle to shut US air base," BBC News, 3 November 2003.
17. Jørgen Dragsdahl, op.cit. Article 16.3 of the U.N. International Labor Organization convention, which was negotiated and ratified by Denmark, states: "Whenever possible, these people shall have the right to return to their traditional lands, as soon as the grounds for relocation ceases to exist."
18. "Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence," Foreign Affairs Canada
19. Humphrey Hawksley, "Arctic battleground for US missile plan," BBC News, 8 June 2001. Thule's radar system has already been threatened with attack by China since it is cheaper than an arms buildup (see Jørgen Dragsdahl, "Et Vigtigt Bombemål," Information, 95, 25 April 2003, 9.
20. AP, "Greenland Base to Be Upgraded As Part of Missile Shield Plan," New York Times, 7 August 2004.
21. Jane George, "Greenland approves ballistic missile defence shield," Nunatsiaq News, 28 May 2004.
22. "Canada won't join missile defence plan," CBC News, 24 Feb 2005.
23. Richard Sanders, "Canada is Aiding and Abetting the Most Ambitious Weapons Development Program in World History," Press for Conversion, 56, June 2005, 3-9. "The unfortunate reality," according to Sanders, is that there is no BMD without Canadian involvement. Furthermore, Canada even requested and secured a role in BMD. See Richard Sanders, "Canada Requested 'Missile Defense' Role," Press for Conversion, 56, June 2005, 10-21. "As far as Canadian corporations, government scientists and military personnel are concerned it is still business as usual with regards to the Canada-US partnership on 'missile defense.'" "CBC News: US missile company scouts Labrador," CBC News, 22 April 2005. It was reported that officials from missile-manufacturing Raytheon Company secretly scouted out sites in Labrador for a radar installation.
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28. Jørgen Dragsdahl, op.cit.

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Kim Petersen is co-editor of [Dissident Voice](#). He can be reached at: kim@dissidentvoice.org. Read other articles by Kim.

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The concluding part of this series discusses the sovereignty of Kalaallit Nunaat.