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In Saintes they are fasting for the end of nuclear weapons

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The Nuclear Disarmament Flame has been burning, since Wednesday, beside the trees from Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The fasters will bring the Nuclear Disarmament Flame to the Saint-Pierre market-square, this morning before the ceremony scheduled for 10.45 a.m. at the Monument to the Fallen.

Paris, and Valduc (the site of the Commissariat for Nuclear Energy), and Saintes are the three French cities commemorating, since Wednesday last, the 69th anniversary of the destruction of Hiroshima et Nagasaki, Japanese cities obliterated by atomic bombs.

Today at 11.02 am it will be exactly 69 years since the second of the bombs was dropped over Nagasaki.

" Explanatory Panels

The activists are fasting in order to remember the victims, but also to call for the abolition of all nuclear weapons. This wish is shared by 81% of French citizens, according to an IFOP poll (Institut français d'opinion publique) commissioned in 2012 by the Mouvement pour la paix.

In Saintes, a city belonging to the international « Abolition 2000 » network and the Mayors for Peace, eight people are showing their commitment by fasting, led by the group called Action des citoyens pour le désarmement nucléaire (ACDN). Its President, Jean-Marie Matagne, had already done a fast for 42 days, in May-June 2012, for the same cause. He notes that in the last ten years, whatever the politics of the team ruling the city, Saintes has always taken a stand against nuclear weapons. « It's not often French towns do that », says Alain, one of the fasters.

The activists have set up their base on the Prairie de la Palu, avenue de Saintonge, beside the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Trees, two ginkgo bilobas planted in 2006 and 2008.

In the middle of the camp are two explanatory panels, given in 2004 by the Hiroshima Mission. They are counterparts to the Nuclear Disarmament Flame, which was lit on Wednesday morning and will be brought through the Saint-Pierre market this morning around 10am.

" From Ariège

Aude, Alain, Luc, Ulysse, Jean-Paul (from Angers), along with Patrice and Marie-Hélène (come specially from Ariège near the Pyrenees) will conclude their fast at noon. The latter are members of the association called Children of Chernobyl Belarus. They have come to lend strength to the movement and, quite simply, add numerical weight to the group of fasters.

This is all done in the hope that they have helped others to hear their call and understand their struggle - a struggle for the end of all nuclear weapons and, by extension, the end of nuclear power-generation (though that is not the focus of the current action).

" From faraway places

This action in Saintes has already received support of great symbolic force. The organisers have received messages of thanks and encouragement from the Mayors of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and from Mgr Emmanuel Lafont, the Bishop of Cayenne. Mgr Jacques Gaillot also gave his support this week.

These signs from faraway places need to become manifest locally. It is not easy to mobilise support, but these activists are persistent. They are calling for a referendum with a very precise question:

« Are you in favour of France participating, with the other states concerned, in the total elimination of nuclear weapons, with mutual and international monitoring that is strict and effective ? »

Timetable : the flame will leave the Prairie de la Palu around 10am, this morning, heading for the Place Saint-Pierre, before the ceremony at 10.45 in front of the Monument to the Fallen. At noon is the breaking of the fast, and a shared meal in the Salle Saintonge.

Séverine Joubert

(English translation by Peter Low, ACDN)