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ON PAGE A3

NEW YORK TIMES
27 October 1985

Greenpeace Affair: A Quick Fade-Out

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN
Special to The New York Times

PARIS, Oct. 26 — The day after France's most recent nuclear test explosion on Mururoa Atoll in the South Pacific, television viewers in Paris saw images of a glassy lagoon that seemed to ripple just slightly at the very instant of the underground blast.

The television showed Prime Minister Laurent Fabius inside a control room at Mururoa and Defense Minister Paul Quilès in a helicopter circling above the test site. There were images of sleepy dogs and French soldiers swimming in the bay, all of them showing that the underground testing program had little visible effect even at the moment of the explosion.

The great attention paid to the test, indeed the presence of Mr. Fabius at the scene, was undoubtedly a result of what has come to be known here as the Greenpeace affair — the intense political scandal that followed the sinking by French agents of a ship belonging to the environmentalist group Greenpeace just before it was to lead a sea-borne protest against the French nuclear tests in July.

But the presence of French television at the test site is about the only aspect of the Greenpeace affair to be evident here recently. The scandal, the worst since the Socialist Government of President François Mitterrand came to power in 1981, has almost entirely faded from the public arena, even though many key questions about the operation remain unanswered.

Explaining the Loss of Interest

"Voltaire once said that it was impossible to get the French to be interested in anything for more than 10 days," said Jean-Marie Benoist, a writer and political commentator, in trying to explain the disappearance of the Greenpeace affair.

"First, Greenpeace was killed by the Gorbachev visit," he said, referring to the Soviet leader's three-day stay in Paris this month. "Then Gorbachev was killed by the hijacking of the Achille Lauro, and nobody particularly remembers Greenpeace anymore."

The extent to which Greenpeace has lost the attention of the public is reflected by the absence of any reaction to a dramatic statement a month ago by Gen. René Imbot, the new head of the French intelligence agency.

General Imbot, appearing simultaneously on all three of France's television networks, said he had uncovered a plot to "destroy" the intelligence agency. Yet since that apparently porten-

tious remark, there has been something close to absolute silence about the purported plot, and there has been no public demand for further information.

To be sure, for several days there were news reports of the war of nerves between the French Navy and five Greenpeace boats that spent several days around Mururoa and on the seizure of the last remaining boat, the sailing ketch Vega, by the French Navy just hours before the test explosion.

It is also possible that as a political scandal Greenpeace may rise again, perhaps next month, when two French agents are to go on trial in New Zealand for their role in the affair. But for now the Greenpeace affair remains a kind of unfinished work, a plot that thickened and then produced no resolution.

Government's 'Big Mistake'

"The big mistake the Government made was to have said it would reveal the full truth in the first place," a political journalist here said. "Nobody was asking for the truth. The French support the testing program and accept that something was done to prevent Greenpeace from interfering with it."

In this sense, there might well never

have been a Greenpeace affair if the precedent of Watergate did not exist. The French press, inspired by the Watergate example, forced the Government into a series of admissions by publishing disclosures on the Greenpeace operation.

But the similarity with Watergate ends there. The rightist opposition, while clearly satisfied with the discomfort of the Socialist Government, never pressed for a full disclosure of the facts. A parliamentary commission of inquiry, called for by Mr. Fabius, never got off the ground because opposition leaders refused to take part in it.

General Imbot, for his part, has provided no details of who was behind the effort to "destroy" the intelligence agency. He talked darkly about cutting off "rotten branches" in the service, but there has been no disclosure of what branches he has cut.

As long ago as Aug. 27, Prime Minister Fabius declared that the Government was "determined that no element remain in the shadows." He vowed that France would take "legal action" if it was proved that French citizens had sunk the boat.

Yet the affair does remain in the shadows. It is still not known, for example, who gave the order to carry out the sabotage. And the only people brought to justice so far are five military or intelligence officers who have been indicted for disclosing information to the press that enabled the scandal to develop.