Speech by Sue Coleman-Haseldine – 8 December 2014

Rosemary Lester, who was originally going to speak here, became too ill to travel to Vienna. She sent me instead and said to “tell it as it is”.

I was born on Koonibba Aboriginal Mission in 1951. From east to west, Koonibba is in the middle of Australia but right down south where the desert meets the sea.

Atomic bomb tests began in the desert areas north of my birthplace in 1953 when I was two years old. First at Emu Fields and then Maralinga.

The area was picked because the British and Australian governments didn’t think our land was valuable. But Aboriginal people were still looking after and living off the land.

There are lots of different Aboriginal groups in Australia. For all of us our land is the basis of our culture. It is our supermarket for our food, our pharmacy for our medicine, our school and our church.

Aboriginal people have special places throughout Australia, including in the vast arid areas. Looking after these places is our religion.

Our old people remember the good life of hunting for wild game and collecting bush fruits. Life was healthy.

There were still Aboriginal people living and travelling this way in the Emu Field and Maralinga region when the bomb tests started.

The government was no good at ensuring everyone was safe.

Australia was even more racist then. At this time Aboriginal people did not even have the right to vote. The government really didn’t care what happened to Aboriginal people.
Many people died and became sick in the immediate test areas. So did the animals. We shouldn’t forget about the animals.

The first atomic bomb called “Totem 1” spread far and wide and there are lots of stories about the “black mist” it created, which killed, blinded and made people very sick.

The bomb tests continued for many years right until 1963. Big atomic tests that the British and Australian governments were proud of and then a whole lot of secret tests that the British did with plutonium.

These tests contaminated a huge area and everything in it but people hundreds of kilometres away were also impacted. This includes my family and the broader community where I live.

I remember older people talking about Nullabor dust storms. It was the fallout from the Maralinga tests.

We weren’t on ground zero, but the dust didn’t stay in one place. It went wherever the winds took it.

I noticed people dying of cancer, something that was new to us.

There’s a cemetery at Woomera which we call the children’s cemetery. It’s filled with children who died around the time of the tests. And these were just the non-Aboriginal children.

There’s no record of how many Aboriginal children died. The Aboriginals were not allowed to be buried in white cemeteries.

In 2006 I went to an Australian Nuclear Free Alliance meeting to learn more about radiation fallout. What I learnt devastated me. To find out that our bush foods were possibly contaminated was a real blow to me.
It was at these meetings I also learnt about other nuclear bombs. About other places where tests happened and also more about Japan during the war.

I also learnt that uranium mined in Australia was used in these weapons of destruction. To know that uranium from our country was devastating other countries and people was a horrible lesson for me. I decided to fight any kind of mining then.

There are too many cancer deaths in our Country. I believe it is caused from radiation contamination, but I can’t prove it. I think any kind of mining in our area would be digging up contaminated earth and sending it back to us on the north, north-west winds.

I am not the only one to notice the sickness and death that remains in this part of Australia. It doesn’t matter if you’re Aboriginal or not, or as I say Black, White or Brindle, everyone has a sad story about premature sickness and death in their families.

Cancer is the big one but it is also common for people to suffer from thyroid conditions. This is the case for myself and one of my granddaughters.

Fertility problems, still births, birth defects became more common at the time of the testing.

But even today we wonder if women have trouble because of the ongoing radiation in the area or genetic changes passed down through generations.

Not knowing the true impact of the nuclear tests causes a lot of anguish and we would like to have answers and hopefully find some solutions. We don’t want others to suffer as we have.

The bombs have destroyed a large part of Australia and despite several attempts it will never be safe or clean.
There are many Aboriginal people who cannot go back to their ancestral lands and their children and their children’s children and so on will never know the special religious places it contains.

Having whole displaced communities has also created confusion and conflict between Aboriginal groups. These are ongoing issues which cause stress and heartbreak.

Thank you for listening about our situation in Australia. We are telling the story so that our history is not forgotten but also to create a better future for all people, all over the world.

This is why we want nuclear weapons permanently banned and the uranium that can create them left in the ground.

If you love your own children and care for the children of the world, you will find the courage to stand up and say “enough”.

Always keeping in mind that the future forever belongs to the next generation.