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THE PRIME MINISTER

18 March 1983

Dear Mr. V. ...

Thank you for writing to me on 28 February enclosing a letter from Mr M. Chapman of 17 Hady Lane, Chesterfield, who has raised a number of questions about the safety of the nuclear tests at Christmas Island.

As Mr Chapman points out, there has recently been considerable discussion in the Press and on television about the UK atmospheric nuclear tests - which were of course conducted not just on Christmas Island but also in Australia - and of the possibility of long-term effects on the health of those who took part. In fact, we are confident that radiation from the tests has had no measurable effects on the health of those who were present. This confidence is derived from the knowledge that the radiological protection standards in force at the time were based on the recommendations of the relevant international and national bodies - the International Commission on Radiological Protection and the Medical Research Council - and that they are not markedly different from those used for radiological protection today.

The most stringent precautions were taken to ensure that the recommended standards were observed. For example at Christmas Island, where Mr. Chapman served, the tests were carried out in ways and at locations such that the direct deposition of radioactivity on, or uptake by, any person on Christmas Island was at most negligible and might only occur, if at all, in the remote southern area of the Island; an area to which entry was strictly controlled. Those people who had duties in any radiologically controlled areas - that is to say areas where there was the

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possibility of exposure to ionising radiations or radioactivity - were required to wear personal devices for recording radiation exposures, known usually as "film badges", at all times when in such areas and also, where necessary, protective clothing. Information on radiation exposures above the minimum recordable level for the film badges in use is still available in summary form in the Ministry of Defence. On this basis, Mr. Chapman's own radiation exposure is assessed for record purposes as zero.

Despite our confidence in the adequacy of the safety measures taken at the time we have in fact decided, in view of the public concern, to test our assessment by conducting a statistical survey to discover whether or not those who took part in the tests have suffered an abnormal incidence of illness. This will take the form of a mortality study, which will take into account causes of death, and also a cancer morbidity study within the limits of the information, contained in the Cancer Register. As I am sure you are aware, cancer is the disease principally associated with radiation, and it is therefore the incidence of cancer which will be the focus of our study - to see whether the incidence amongst test personnel is any different from that of a similar group of people who were not involved in the tests. As far as Mr. Chapman's own medical condition is concerned, I should point out that there has never been any suggestion in the scientific literature that there is a connection between bronchial asthma and ionising radiation.

There have already been one or two attempts to conduct such a survey of British test personnel, but no reliance whatsoever can be placed on any published so far. This is because they are derived almost exclusively from those cases where some damage is thought to have been caused; men who continue to be completely healthy are unlikely to think it worthwhile reporting this fact. Our survey, by using records already accessible to Government, will avoid this bias. Furthermore, there is no requirement to look at individual case histories or give individual medical examinations; the evidence which will emerge from a statistically valid mortality and cancer morbidity study based on these existing

records will give a clear indication as to whether we should extend our investigations; and, if so, in what direction.

Finally, Mr. Chapman mentions the Gilbertese who were evacuated from Christmas Island during the tests there. This was done to make sure that they were absolutely safe and to protect them from, for example, the flash from the explosion, the effects of which may be experienced at a distance of many miles if precautions are not taken. Although such precautions could be ensured in the case of military personnel, this would have been far from easy in the case of the native population, to whom the same controls could not be applied. It is not the case that they returned to any danger; their village was a considerable distance from the area where there was any possibility of radioactivity. Indeed, as far as the Island as a whole is concerned, a recent survey by an independent New Zealand radiation laboratory has confirmed earlier assessments that no site on the Island presents a risk to the resident population or requires any restriction on land use.

I hope that this will help to reassure Mr. Chapman of the close attention that was paid to safety during the conduct of the atmospheric nuclear tests.

Yours sincerely

Raymond Baxter

The Rt. Hon. Eric Varley, M.P.