



THE MEMPHIS DEPOT TENNESSEE

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Why is everyone ignoring Depot cancer victims?

By Tony Jones

Tri-State Defender Staff Writer

Vice President Al Gore Jr. will be strongly urging the Black community here to vote for him this fall, but before he tries painting the Republican Party's platform as evil incarnate, perhaps he should study why residents living near the Army Depot say they can find no help to discover why the area has such a high number of cancer victims. A citizen's committee planning protests about environmental racism have tracked more than 187 different chemicals dumped there over the years.

As U.S. Army engineers prepare to "dig up unholy hell," from under the ground at the depot, community activists are teaming with environmental activists from throughout the nation to draw community and, they hope, world-wide interest to the plight of the depot's neighbors.

Beginning in April and expected to be completed by July, the U. S. Army Engineering Support Center will be working to dig up mustard gas that has been buried at the depot since the early 50s. They have erected a vapor containment structure that they say contains and filters any chemical warfare agents that may be released during the excavation.

Protest meetings this weekend will discuss the matter as part of a three-day conference at Dunn Avenue School and other locations exploring environmental racism. Beginning today throughout the weekend, several groups have banded together to sound an

alarm about the problem of environmental racism. Clinton charged with snubbing area's cancer victims, and the mayor is being accused of turning a deaf ear to the Depot area's concerns.

With activist Dick Gregory on board as a key speaker, The Interim National Black Environmental and Economic Justice Coordinating Committee (INBEEJCC) is the umbrella group leading the weekend. Intended to upgrade public concern, several locations are planned for demonstrations, including a mock funeral procession through neighborhoods near the depot to dramatize the confounding situation the area faces.

Under the auspices "Days of Outrage and Action Against Environmental Racism," three days of community events will be staged to draw attention to why minority communities nationwide suffer from health problems triggered by environmental influences.

Meeting sites Saturday include Hamilton High School, 9 a.m.; Knight Arnold Church of Christ, 440 Knight Arnold, 12 p.m. and 1:30 p.m.

Sunday, meetings will be held at the New Sardis Baptist Church at 7739 E. Holmes Road, 11 a.m.; Monday at Macedonia B. C., 2093 Perry Road, 9 a.m.; Mock Funeral at Lincoln Park, (near Hamilton High School), 1:30 p.m.; Clifford Davis Federal Building, 3:30 p.m.

Interim Coordinator for INBEEJCC Damu Smith says, "We're coming to Memphis to urgently call on the Clinton/Gore Administration to defend, expand and enforce environmental protection and civil rights laws at toxic federal facilities, and other contaminating sites affecting communities of color across the country." With groups such as Greenpeace, the National Congress of Black Churches, the USA Toxics Campaign and the National People of Color and Disenfranchised Communities Environmental Health Network, the group hopes to increase public knowledge and concern about environmental racism.

The problems emanating from the depot area are a perfect example, the unified groups staging the protests feel. The mock funeral they will stage will conjure memories of too many real services held for people from the area, recounts Doris Bradshaw, who heads the civic organization Defense Depot Memphis, Tennessee—Concerned Citizens Committee. She says it's been hard to get attention to the plight of the depot's neighbors.

"I took a group of 10 kids from this area suffering with cancer to meet President Clinton in February," she says. "We had an appointment and they assured us the president would meet with us to discuss the health problems we think seepage from the depot has caused. We traveled all that way and he would not meet with us. He claimed something more pressing came up. That's just

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Say Clinton snubs area

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how it's been in trying to get attention about our concerns."

Bradshaw began to become suspicious that something was wrong in the depot area when her grandmother contracted cancer. "She grew all of her own vegetables and fruits. She contracted cancer in her kidney, but her lifestyle didn't support such a diagnosis. We have too many teenagers from this area suffering with cancer."

She feels a detailed toxic assessment has to be done in the area, "but all we get is the run-around when we try to seek information. Even now, they're planing on digging gas canisters up, but they have not come and told this neighborhood about it. When we asked them what we would have to do in a worse case scenario, depot officials said, we just have to stay inside and shut our doors."

The depot is also seeking the public's interest. In an attempt to alleviate fears of the cleanup process, claimed to be overwhelmingly safe, the depot is holding a series of community meetings, including weekly

briefings, to keep the public informed about the cleanup. Scheduled through May, the public can call (901) 544-0163 for more information and meeting times.

The vapor containment structure and the monitoring equipment overseeing the process has been used successfully throughout the nation, depot officials assure

The material to be excavated was buried there in the 40s, at the height of World War II. Utilizing historic records and interviews with former employees, it was found that clothing, chlorinated solvents used to clean or degrease metal parts, petroleum, oil and lubricant materials, industrial compounds, paint and paint thinner, eye ointments and even food were buried at the site. It is the unknown potential danger in the decomposing of these materials that scare residents.

The above ground mounds which has been speculated about for so many years contained fluorspar and bauxite, which has since been sold to various businesses. No radioactive materials are said to have been buried.

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