US atoll destroying super-mines containing VX nerve agent, ending North Pacific operations

AUCKLAND (AFP) The US army is destroying 13,302 land mines on lonely Johnston Atoll in the North Pacific and when the job is over the centre will cease is controversial operations, a statement Thursday said.

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Johnston Atoll has since 1990, over strong Pacific political objection, been the site of the destruction of tens of thousands of mortar shells, artillery shells, rockets and bombs containing mustard gas and sarin nerve agents. Most were shipped there from Okinawa, Germany and the Solomon Islands where the US had left them after World War II. In a statement, the Johnston Atoll Chemical Agent Disposal System (JACADS) said they began destroying the mines last Friday. Each mine contains VX nerve agent, an extremely deadly chemical agent. JACADS was the US's first fully-integrated chemical weapons disposal facility and has destroyed 399,430 munitions and bulk agents over the past 10 years. The VX land mine campaign will end by January 2001 and represents the third and final chemical weapons disposal milestone at JACADS. "The Army's final munitions campaign will be a great accomplishment, and leads up to what will become the army's highest achievement in the chemical stockpile disposal project yet -- the closure of its first chemical weapons disposal facility," said JACADS Project Manager Gary McCloskey said in a statement. Johnston Island, only slightly larger than the runway down its middle, is 1330 kilometres (825 miles) south-west of Hawaii. Continental Air Micronesia flights from Honolulu to Majuro, in the Marshall Islands, land there, but while planes are re-fuelled passengers remain on board and armed guards surround the plane. A factory and bunkers line the south side of the runway, while 1,200 personal live to the north. Part of the US National Wildlife Refugees system, Johnston is home to terms and noddlies, shearwaters and petrels, frigate birds and boobies while the lagoon is a breeding ground for green turtles. Johnston has been used to store chemical weapons since 1971. In 1985 the US Congress directed the destruction of its chemical weapons but when the US first proposed JACADS, a 1990 Pacific Forum summit meeting in Vanuatu ended in uproar. Then Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke defended the facility, but other leaders strongly condemned it and the US compromised by allowing Pacific countries the right to monitor its programme. Washington promised to close the facility by 2000 and destroy remaining chemical weapons in Oregon, Utah, Colorado, Arkansas, Alabama, Indiana, Kentucky and Maryland into the year 2004.

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