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History

The air base: Just in time

In part two of our history of Thule Air Base, Denmark manages to work quickly enough to avoid violating its constitution, but escaping its past is proving difficult



CULTURE Our pollution, you will have with you. Always (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

April 11, 2017 - 5:32am - By Iben Bjørnsson

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This second in a two-part series. Read [first article](#).

On June 5, a new Danish constitution was to take effect. One of the biggest changes was that it now also applied to Greenland. Greenland was to be an integrated part of the Kingdom of Denmark. The Danish rules for expropriation of land (including reparations) are laid down in the constitution and from June 5, that would also cover Thule.

To the knowledge of this author, no smoking gun has been found revealing that the Danish government purposely moved the

This is the 10th article in a series published in collaboration with [Arktisk Institut/The Danish Arctic Institute](#), which seeks to inform the public about Danish-Greenlandic history.

The articles are based on the institute's [Arctic Stories](#) podcast series, which is produced by the author.

The original version of this podcast (in Danish only) can be heard below. All of the episodes in the series are available on from most podcast platforms,

population before June 5. However, it is hard to rid oneself of the thought, considering the rush. As Mr Lyngø dryly remarks: “Rushing the removal through before June was a really smart move by the colonial administration.”

A forced and rushed removal was not the official story told by Danish authorities. Colonial administrators had talked to the local council of hunters for some time about the possibility of a relocation. But the decision was made and rushed through without the consent, or even knowledge, of the council.

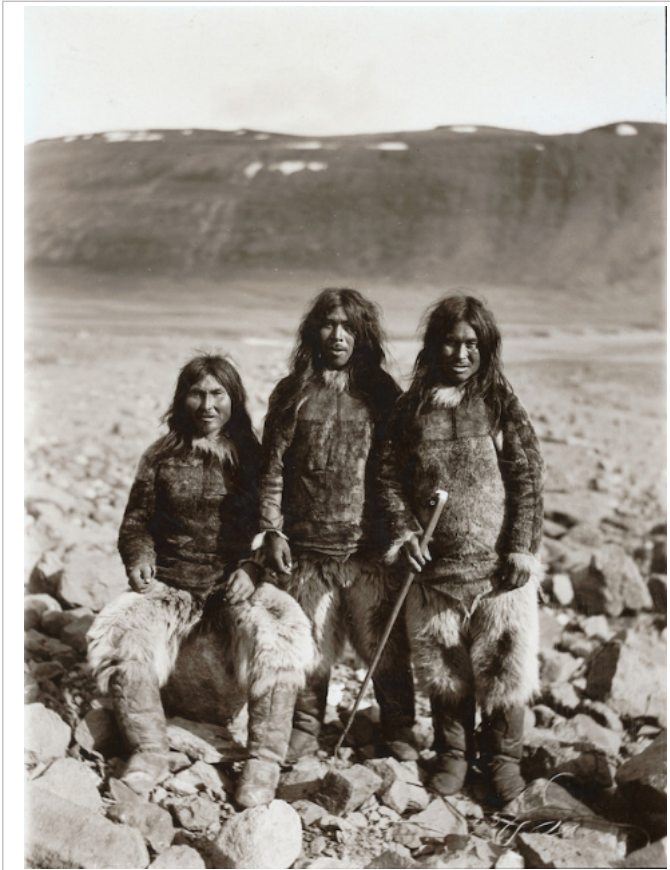
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Inughuit hunters. From left: Napsanguaq, Itsukusuk and Uvdloriak, 1909 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Mr Harlang: “Right before the removal, some representatives from the local council was called to Copenhagen and told of the decision. And the very day they boarded a plane back to Greenland, the prime minister’s office issued a press release which the local council representatives had no hand in writing, stating that the prime minister had accepted the Thule populations wish to move. This statement went unfiltered into Danish media and became the established truth: the population there had asked for, and been granted, permission to move.”

Why right there?

Ms Eipe: *It is hard to figure out whose fault it was. But why did they have to build a base right there, when they could have found somewhere else, somewhere with no people? They paid no consideration to us, who lived there. They just threw us out into nothing. I still don’t know who made that decision.*

It’s a good question; why did they have to have a base right there? The answer holds a gloomy irony. It was the very presence of Inughuit that set the wheels in motion leading to

their removal. Mr Harlang: “There is an almost unbearable sadness to this. The people were there because the wild animals were there. Knud Rasmussen built his colony by the settlement, because the people were there. The weather station and airstrip was established because the colony was there. And the base was built there because the weather station and the air strip was there.”

Aside from being incredibly traumatic, the forced removal held another problem: conditions for hunting in the new location was not nearly as favourable as it had been at Uummannaq. But the removal, with all the problems attached to it, was not spoken of publicly for many years. Publicly and officially, there were no problems. In the mid-1950s Uummannaq was torched to ensure that no one came back.

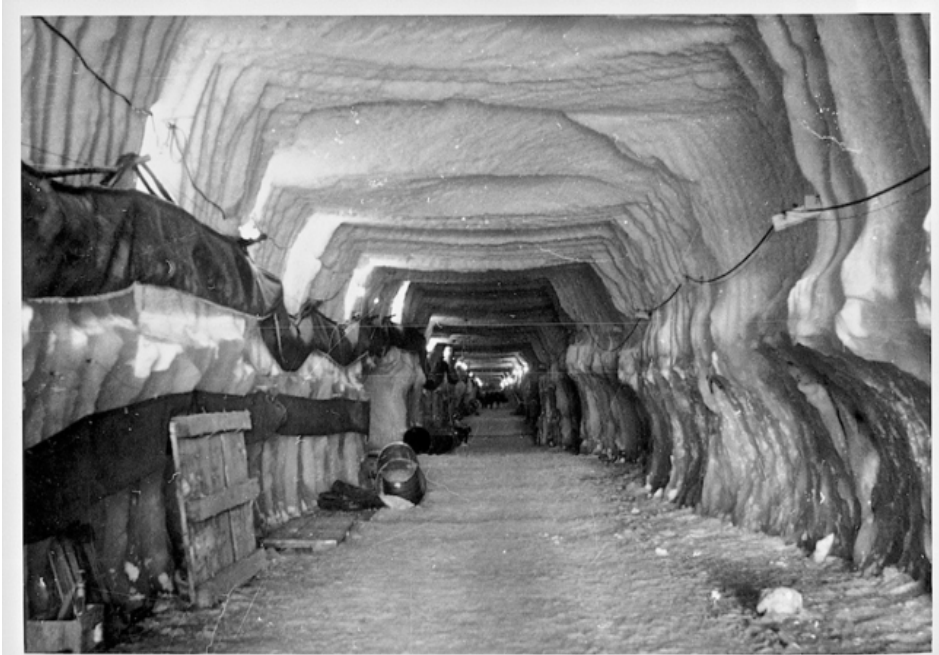


American materials arriving by barge, early 1960s (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

The new air base at Thule grew rapidly throughout the 1950s. By the end of the decade, 10,000 people were living and working there. And as intercontinental ballistic missiles entered the arms race, the US built a gigantic radar as part of the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS). The radar was ready for use in 1960.

Further inland, on the ice sheet – or, to be precise, under it – the US built a base, Camp Century, made up of three kilometres of tunnels. Camp Century was part of the aptly named Project Iceworm and should have been a part of the American defence system in Greenland. However, the Americans had to give up Iceworm as it turned out that the ice sheet was not stable, rather, it moved around.

Thule Air Base presented a conundrum between an American defence strategy based on nuclear weapons and a ban on nuclear weapons on Danish soil in peacetime.



Project Iceworm, building tunnels through the ice (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Mr Lidegaard: “It becomes a question of the definition of ‘Danish soil’. Does it mean geographical Denmark, or the kingdom, including Greenland and the Faroes? Back then no one asked that question, at least not officially.”

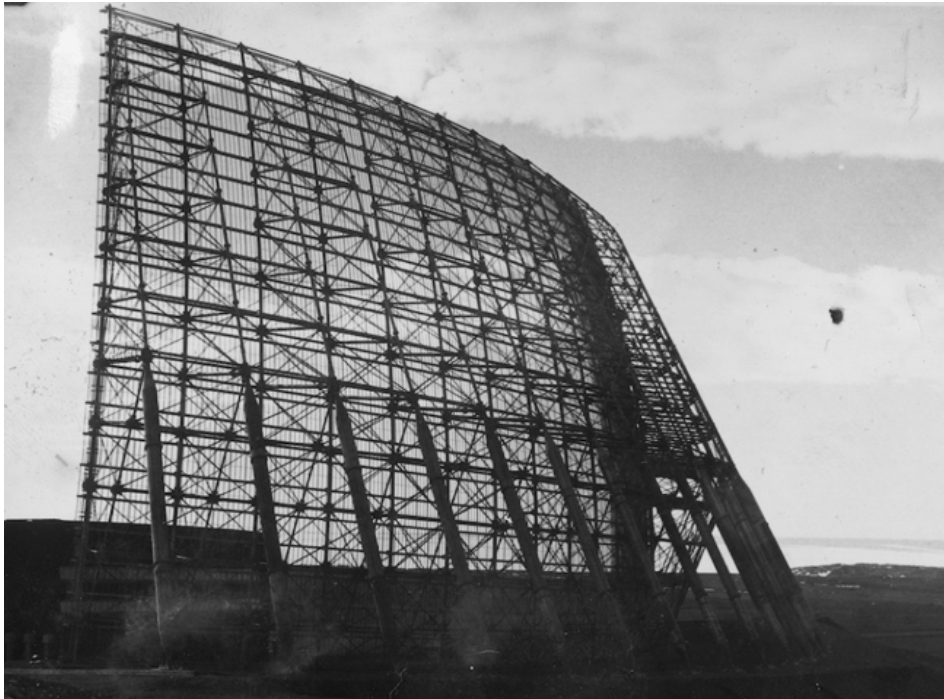
There was actually a precedent for the interpretation of this: Denmark’s 1953 ban foreign bases and troops on its soil during peacetime. This obviously did not cover Greenland, and no-one attempted to say that it did. Hence there were no reason to assume that the nuclear ban did, either. And in higher political circles, probably no-one did. Especially not after US Ambassador Val Peterson, in 1957, payed a visit to HC Hansen, prime minister at the time.

In a letter to Peterson shortly thereafter, Hansen summed up the conversation:

During your visit here some days ago you made some remarks about the possible storing of supplies of munition of a special kind on the defence areas in Greenland. I gathered that your Government did not see any problem in this matter, which in its opinion was covered by the agreement of April 27, 1951 (...). You did not submit any concrete plan as to such possible storing, nor did you ask questions as to the attitude of the Danish Government to this item.

The PM’s answer?

I do not think that your remarks give rise to any comments from my side.



The BMEWS radar, early 1960s (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Mr Lidegaard: “HC Hansen’s answer might be cryptic, but it is the only answer he can give, namely: as you asked no question you need no answer. This answer was, rightly, perceived by the Americans as a silent acceptance.”

The ambassador had communicated that the US considered itself within the rights of the base agreement to station nuclear weapons at Thule. Hansen basically answered that there was nothing he could do about that. He was right. “The point here is not that Denmark could have somehow prevented it, because Denmark couldn’t. The point is that the Danish Government chose to keep it a secret from parliament, from the public and not least, from Greenland,” Mr Lidegaard says.

The crash

By not talking about it, leading politicians gave both the Danish and Greenlandic public the impression that the entire kingdom was free of nuclear weapons.

The illusion held until January 21, 1968 when a B-52 bomber crashed on the ice outside of Thule. It was carrying four nuclear bombs.

It created quite the stir and, as Mr Lidegaard explains, took a toll on the Danish-Greenlandic relationship, both in 1968 and in the 1990s when the “HC Hansen letter”, as it is called, became known by the public.

“It made people in Greenland mistrust that Denmark was looking out for Greenland’s best interests in the relation to the US. It created a sense that neither Greenland nor Denmark really knew what went on at Thule Air Base. And, bluntly speaking, they didn’t. They still don’t.”



Wrecked plane at Thule (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

The plane crash was followed by a demand for compensation from the Danish Thule Air Base workers who had helped clean up after the accident and been exposed to radiation. And even if numerous examinations show that there is no excess mortality or sickness in this group, the Danish state chose to settle and pay 50,000 kroner (\$7,000) to each of them, without admitting guilt.

An investigation opens

This decision can seem odd, considering the other legal ramifications of Thule Air Base. Because, how about the forcibly removed population, Inughuit? No-one really heard anything about them for decades. They had moved voluntarily and everything was in order.

In Greenland though, alternative versions of the story surfaced time and again. Mr Lynge: “I heard about it as a child, because my father was a member of the Greenlandic National council and visited Thule. It was also supposed to have been brought before the council in 1968, but remarkably and very mysteriously, the case disappeared. It has been buried rather deep.”

All of this changed in 1985, when Mads Fægteborg and Jens Brøsted, both of Københavns Universitet/the University of Copenhagen, published a paper about Thule. Mr Harlang: “Their conclusion – which proved to be right – was that the population had been forced to move.”

This got people interested in looking into what happened. But proving anything was difficult. The state denied any wrongdoing. Along with Thule County, Inughuit made the case for compensation from the Danish state. Mr Harlang: “The state then formed a commission to investigate the matter. They investigated for seven years and in 1994 came to the conclusion that the Danish state had done nothing wrong.”



Qaanaaq, 1971 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

With the support of Mr Lynge and the ICC, the former Uummannaq residents formed an organisation, Hingitaq (which means ‘displaced’) 53, and hired a lawyer to sue the Danish state. Mr Lynge: “It was hard work, because the Danish state wasn’t very co-operative and we didn’t have a big apparatus. But the ICC, with what little money and staff we had, did what we could to support them. We fought to spend some public funding on the investigation and facilitate the contact to a lawyer in Denmark.”

That lawyer was Mr Harlang: “I took on the case, because I found it important. It was an important case, because the population was forced to move away from their hunting grounds, which was their livelihoods. The crux of the matter was that they lived in the place where they could sustain themselves and they were moved to a place where they could not.”

Inactivity and limitation

The attorney general argued that the case be dismissed due to the statute of limitation and a claim that Inughuit had forfeited their legal claims due to inactivity; that they had failed to take the appropriate legal steps within the proper timeframe. But Mr Harlang argued that the two could not be treated separately. They were an integrated part of the case. The state couldn’t claim limitation and inactivity, when all attempts at speaking up had been silenced.

Or, as stated by Ms Eipe said in her 1996 interview:

They [Danish authorities] did whatever they wanted and it didn’t matter whether we said something or not. It was of no consequence. And if we said something, they became angry. So, we sat down and waited for many years, because we thought they would take up the matter. But as nothing happened, we had to bring up the problem ourselves.

And the High Court agreed. The statute of limitations didn’t apply in this case, and neither did the statute of inactivity. Mr Harlang: “It wasn’t just a question of looking at a calendar at how many years had passed. It was a question of whether limitation was even relevant, given the circumstances that the Uummannaq population had been subdued to, namely a total absence of legal advice, almost brutal means and later on the suppression of any attempts to raise the question of compensation.”



Inughuit women Arnaruniak (left) and Inatdliak, 1909 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

And Hingitaq 53 actually won, what had come to be known as the Thule Case. The High Court ruled that they had been forcibly removed: “All the way through to the verdict in the summer of 1999, the State’s Attorney on behalf of the Danish state claimed that the population in Thule had moved voluntarily. However, the verdict clearly states that it was a violation of their human rights. It was something that was done to them.”

Mr Harlang won the case by simply doing what no one else had bothered to do: ask the people themselves. “The hearing was held in the nursing home in Qaanaaq, so that those who had experienced being forced off their land first hand could testify. It was very moving to hear them give their accounts of what had happened. After that, no one in the room doubted that the witnesses had been forced to move.”

The win even led to an official apology by prime minister. The only apology ever issued by Denmark to anyone in its former colonies. Still, Mr Harlang and Hingitaq 53 chose to appeal. “We didn’t think that we had won sufficiently. We won on the issues of limitation and inactivity, we won the case of forced removal and the court agreed that Inughuit is an indigenous tribe with collective human rights and the court granted them compensation. However, the size of that compensation was rude and almost offensive. For being forced to move and for waiting for so many years for justice, they each received 17,000 kroner. Can you imagine?”



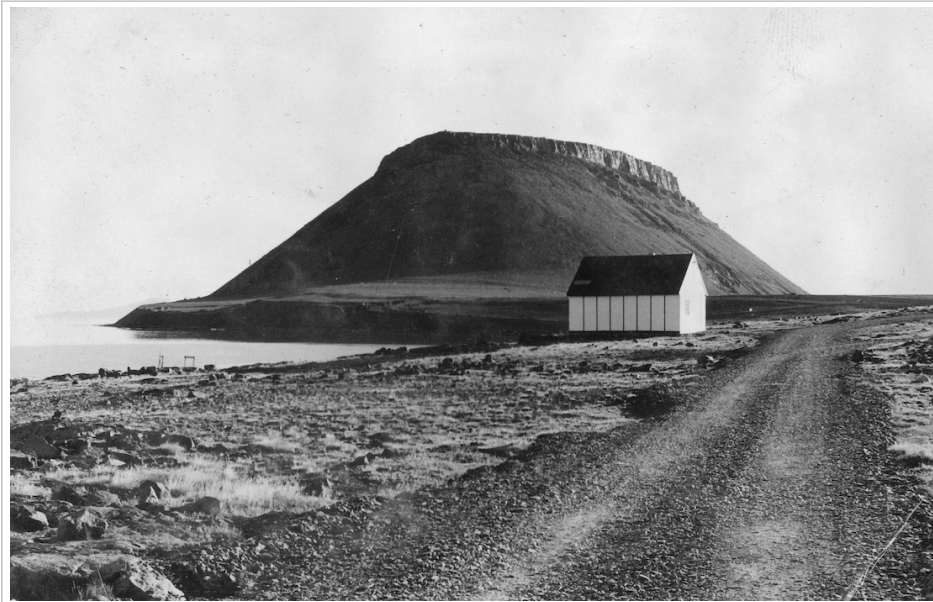
Someone else's home (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

He's right, it's not much. And it less than the 50,000 each of the Danish workers got, without having to bring legal action or present medical evidence to support their claim.

But the size of the compensation was not the only thing that caused Mr Harlang to appeal. "Perhaps even more important than the past is the future and the survival of Inughuit: namely access to their old hunting grounds. We had demanded that they be given the use of the area back and thought it was a very logical consequence of the court ruling that they had been unlawfully removed. It's really very basic law: if you wrongly take something from someone, you have to give it back."

However, the Supreme Court didn't agree. Because, even though they had been forced of their land, the land was not covered by the rules of expropriation under the Danish constitution. Or, rather, they weren't at the time. Remember? The new constitution also covering Greenland didn't take effect until a week after the forced removal. Hence, even if the people had been treated wrongly, the court ruled that taking the land itself was legal.

"I still follow the case in the UN. Even if the Thule case is over in the Danish legal system, it still lives internationally. For several years running, the UN has criticised Denmark for not taking steps to restore Inughuit access to the hunting territory. The eyes of the international community are on Denmark in this case. But it is a slow process and unfortunately, the UN does not have the leverage it should have."



Left behind. Knud Rasmussen's old house, early 1960s (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

The reason for wanting to return to the original settlement at Uummannaq is, according to Mr Harlang, that in Qaanaaq only a third of the population can sustain themselves by hunting: "If they do not get their hunting grounds back, they can't survive as a culturally distinct people. There's no livelihood in Qaanaaq. There are no jobs. If Inughuit are to make their own living, they have to move back to where they were. Because the livelihood is why they settled there in the first place."

The old settlement has been brought back under the jurisdiction of the Greenlandic Self-Rule Authority. So in theory, a decision can be made to allow them to return. But it is not that simple, Mr Lynge says. Because, even if it does not cover quite as big an area today, Thule Air Base is still there.

"It is a recurring issue in the Arctic: being the small neighbour of huge installations, be it military installations, mining fields or oil drillings. It doesn't really go well with being a small people living off the land. Military installations do not pay regard to environment, hunting and fishing and Inuit with rifles scare the Americans. Remember, we are armed to the teeth!" he adds jokingly only to become serious again, "the Inughuit lifestyle in Thule is not compatible with big technological installations."



Qaanaaq, 1976 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Hence, the freedom to move around in the area is still limited. And there is another factor: the environment.

In the early 2000s a series of investigations revealed that the waters and sea animals off Thule were contaminated with heavy metals, primarily PCB from the base's garbage dumps. In 2011, an investigation into radiation levels near the base was conducted, concluding that it is not dangerous to move around in the area, but also that further investigations are needed if people were to live off the land there, especially radiation levels in animals and in a larger area as some of the contamination moves around with the meltwater.

Furthermore, in 2016, scientists found out that Camp Century, the base under the ice sheet, is in danger of leaking toxic waste because of the increased melting of the ice sheet. Denmark has claimed responsibility for cleaning up contamination left by American bases, but many in Greenland are frustrated that nothing is happening.



The iron dump at Thule Air Base, early 1960s. It is dumps like these that leak contamination (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Mr Lynge: “Ten years ago, it was said that before anyone was even able to live in the old settlement Uummannaq, it would take 250 million kroner worth of cleaning. In the end only some 25 million kroner was spent limiting the contamination. If this had been Danish installations in Denmark proper, it would be cleaned up right away but here, we have waited for years.”

The Greenland card

Once again, the mistrust of 1968 and the Thule case surfaces. A lot of Greenlanders simply do not trust that Denmark will always act in their best interest.

“The Thule case was a lesson in the workings of a colonial administration,” Mr Lynge says. “The state continued to claim that the state does not make mistakes. The state does no wrong. Hypocrisy and colonial attitudes have always affected these issues. It affects the Foreign Ministry and it affects judicial matters even today. These cases continue. They are not forgotten. The human consequences are too big.”



Man searching through clothes thrown away by American soldiers at Thule Air Base, 1961 (Photo: © Jette Bang Photo)

An aspect of the discussion has been whether Denmark gave the US free reigns in Greenland in order to cut some corners in Nato. It is referred to as “the Greenland card” and is still debated among historians. One of them is Mr Lidegaard.

“It is beyond doubt that the Greenland card played a role during the Cold War and continues to play an important role in our relationship with the US. But what that means is not that that simple. It has not only been to the advantage of Denmark and it has not only been at the expense of Greenland. Because Greenland is so huge, the resources so scarce and the stakes so high there, Denmark could have never defended it on her own. Don’t forget that the agreements with the US relate to the defense of Greenland. Yes, they have also been of major importance to the defense of the rest of the North American continent,

but that does not mean that they have not been an advantage for Greenland, both logistically and in relation the defense of the big island."

Where do we go from here?

Mr Lynge acknowledges the realities of the security issues at play. But he wishes that Denmark and the US would go about it differently.

"Of course we need a general understanding of the strategic reality and the necessity of the American presence. But we need rules to play by, that give us a chance to know what is going on. We have agreements to that effect that bring both Denmark and Greenland on board: the 2005 Itilleq Declaration on Greenlandic involvement in foreign policy and the Igaliku Agreement of 2004, which amends and supplements the 1951 treaty to include the voice of the Greenlandic government. When that treaty was signed, the American secretary of state visited and talked directly with the Greenlandic foreign minister. That was incredible, and that's the way to do it! However, I don't think that spirit of diplomacy can be revived the way thing are developing at the moment. And that was the spirit lacking in the early 1950s. If there had been an understanding of the Inughuit as people, their way of life and their attachment to Uummannaq I don't think we would have seen those harsh violations."



Qaanaaq, 1987 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Mr Lynge's lack of optimism can be ascribed to the increasing strategic importance and militarisation of the Arctic brought about by global warming, and the presidency of Donald Trump. "Politically, we need to brace ourselves for an increased strategic interest in the northernmost areas. A military and strategic mindset regarding the Arctic will come to dominate once more."

That brings us back to where we started. The security issues raised by the Second World War and the Cold War remain unsolved.

Mr Harlang: "The core of the problem, which makes the Thule issue so difficult, is the meeting of the very big and the very small. The meeting of mighty US and one of the world's smallest populations. With Denmark as the nervous man in the middle."

Mr Lidegaard: "We should be under no illusion that the Danish or Greenlandic public know the full extent of what went on and what goes on at Thule Air Base."



Thule Air Base, 1990 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

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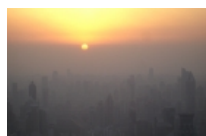


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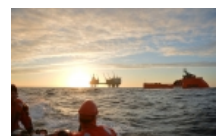


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