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Ottawa to study veterans' health after hunger strike

The Canadian Press



Veteran Pascal Lacoste flashes a peace sign as he is loaded on an ambulance, ending his hunger strike in front of Veterans Affairs Minister Steven Blaney's local riding office in Levis, Que., Tuesday, November 8, 2011. (Jacques Boissinot / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

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LEVIS, Que. — The federal government will create a new committee to study veterans' health in the wake of a hunger strike by an ex-soldier who insists he was contaminated by depleted uranium while serving in Bosnia.

Veterans Affairs Minister Steven Blaney made the announcement in Levis, Que., after Pascal Lacoste ended his protest and allowed himself to be taken away in an ambulance Tuesday.

Lacoste, who battled to get Ottawa to recognize his uranium poisoning while serving overseas, flashed a two-fingered "victory" sign as he ended his hunger strike.

He swigged grape juice as he was loaded into an ambulance that took him to hospital for treatment. Over four days, Lacoste had been depriving himself of all food and liquids except for capfuls of water to help him take prescription medication.

Lacoste said he wasn't just fighting for himself; he had refused an offer of medical treatment until Ottawa agreed to help any other veteran in his situation.

Further details of the board will be announced in the next 30 days, said Blaney. The minister said the body will comprise academics, medical researchers and soldiers.

"It's a committee that will have a broad mandate," Blaney said, adding that he wants to see Lacoste's health get better, along with the health of other veterans.

Lacoste blames his poor health, which includes chronic pain and a degenerative neurological disorder, on depleted-uranium poisoning he believes he contracted in Bosnia in the 1990s.

The Veterans Affairs Department has maintained it's unlikely any Canadian troops were contaminated with depleted uranium because few, if any, ever came in contact with it while in the service.

His doctor said tests have shown he does have an unusually high level of uranium in his hair but an independent radiation expert questions the reliability of the testing.

Depleted uranium, a leftover of uranium processing, has been used to make some types of munitions and military armour.

The dense, low-cost metal was used in conflicts such as the Balkans and the first Gulf War, where Canadian troops were on the ground.

Lacoste was very tired after the strike, during which he chained himself to his SUV outside Blaney's office. But his spirits were good.

"The morale, the mind is pretty good," said friend and lawyer Louis Sirois. "He's clear of mind and alert."

The strike took an obvious toll over four days. The ex-soldier collapsed briefly on Monday when his blood pressure dipped and he was given oxygen by paramedics.

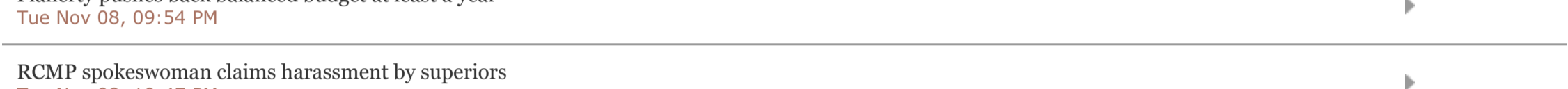
Sirois said Blaney had personally promised to get Lacoste whatever treatment he needs.

Lacoste said he hopes to help other military vets who might be poisoned with depleted uranium but don't even know it.

Major international bodies, like the United Nations and the World Health Organization, have published reports saying there is no scientific evidence to link depleted uranium to health problems.

According to Veterans Affairs, tests performed a decade ago on around 200 returning soldiers did not find any toxic levels.

It is only believed to be harmful if dust from spent ammunition or damaged armour is ingested or inhaled.



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