

Micronesia goes it alone

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Bikinians paying price for nuclear testing

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Majuro, Marshall Islands—"One of the saddest stories in the world," a Guam newspaper has called it.

It is the story of the people of Bikini Island, who were removed from their homes so that the United States could use their Western Pacific atoll for testing nuclear bombs, were shunted from one unsatisfactory resettlement site to another for years, finally were told that they could safely return to Bikini and now have been ordered to move once again because their island turns out to be poisoning them.

There has been "nothing but hardship for the people all these 30 years," Henchi Balos, an educated young Bikinian, says. "The people are not happy." And there is no happy ending in sight for this sad story.

Actually, the Bikini people's history of unhappy wandering begins 32 years ago, in 1946, when U.S. officials decided to use the atoll in which their island is situated for atomic-bomb tests. The 167 residents were not consulted on this decision, but were simply ordered to board ships and leave.

Then the United States, which had taken the island chains of the territory called Micronesia from Japan in World War II and achieved formal control through a United Nations-mandated "strategic trust-

eeship," proceeded to detonate bombs with enormous destructive force.

The Bikini island vegetation was blown away or took on mutant forms. Three other islands in Bikini Atoll disappeared completely, having been vaporized, as the expression goes.

The islanders, meanwhile, were deposited first on Rongerik, an atoll east of Bikini, where there were shortages of both food and water. After two years of near starvation they were taken to a camp on the island of Kwajalein, then a naval base, for eight months. Finally they were removed to Kili, an isolated island, not part of an atoll, 600 miles southeast of Bikini.

From having been masters of 36 islands totaling more than two square miles for growing coconut, pandanus and breadfruit, and a peaceful lagoon providing the other staple of their diet, fish, the Bikinians found themselves reduced to living on

less than half a square mile of land with no lagoon.

There were not enough coconuts on Kili and the Bikinian fishermen had to encounter the crashing waves of the ocean. In the spring the surf was particularly rough; two fishermen lost their lives. To make matters worse the population expanded, eventually tripling.

Trust territory government ships began bringing in food, and the once self-sufficient Bikinians became more and more dependent on these supplies.

In 1954, the United States began providing compensation to the Bikinians: \$10 a person every six months.

The Bikinians Mr. Balos says, "are the poorest people in the Marshall Islands."

Bomb tests in Bikini ended in 1958. Five years later the nuclear test-ban treaty outlawed all atmospheric nuclear testing.

In 1969, the federal agency then called the Atomic Energy Commission declared Bikini safe for resettlement by its people.

To prepare for the return of the Bikinians, the island was bulldozed and debris and old coconut trees removed to reduce radiation. Forty homes were constructed and thousands of new coconut trees were planted. About \$3 million was spent.

Many of the people were eager to re-

turn, even though destruction of part of the reef had permitted sharks to enter the lagoon and scientists warned that crabs were too radioactive to be eaten safely.

In the early 1970's, several families, totaling about 100 persons, returned to Bikini. It was intended that the others would follow once additional housing could be built and adequate food supplies assured.

Then some of the Bikinian leaders and Marshallese politicians began to voice suspicions that Bikini might not be safe after all.

Ataji Balos, Henchi Balos's uncle, a legislator in the Congress of Micronesia whose district includes Bikini, is from a family that owns land in Rongelap, an atoll directly east of Bikini. He recalls that he had been trying to attract attention to a disturbing situation there, a story even sadder than that of the Bikinians.

In 1954, during the test of a 15-megaton thermonuclear bomb at Bikini, the wind shifted, carrying clouds over Rongelap and depositing a potentially lethal dose of radioactive fallout on its 86 inhabitants.

The Rongelapese were evacuated after a few days and taken to Kwajalein for treatment. Then they came to Majuro, the Marshall Islands district center, for two years. In 1957, the Atomic Energy Commission pronounced Rongelap safe for

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their return, and a number of the people went back. The Rongelapese who went back began developing radiation-connected medical problems like thyroid tumors and leukemia. And according to Mr. Balos, those afflicted included not only people who had been on the atoll during the 1954 blast but also some who had been away at the time but returned to eat the local fruit and drink the water.

To him, that meant that there was something remaining on the atoll that was poisoning the people.

Even as he campaigned for better medical treatment for the Rongelap people — they were being visited by doctors once a year and the ones with tumors sent off for surgery — Mr. Balos suspected that Bikini probably was not really safe, either.

By 1974, he remembers, he was warning that the Bikini people living on Bikini should not be there and the ones still living on Kili should not move to Bikini. His nephew, Henchi, recalls that many of those on Kili heeded the advice and declined to be resettled on Bikini, asking money compensation for their loss of homes instead.

The legislator demanded a new radiological survey, using the latest instruments, on Bikini, Rongelap and other atolls and islands where fallout might pose continuing problems.

Such an overall survey was not done then — Mr. Balos was branded a troublemaker, he says. But in 1975, when Bikini residents had their annual medical examinations, they started to show abnormal amounts of strontium, cesium and plutonium — radioactive elements which can cause cancer over the long term — in their bodies.

The U.S. Congress that year established a \$3 million trust fund for the Bikinians.

But last year a study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, which includes the successors to the Atomic Energy Commission, found that the amounts of contaminants being absorbed by Bikinians from the water and from plants grown in still-radioactive soil would over a period of years be far greater than the limits set by federal guidelines.

News accounts from Washington earlier this year quoted a Department of Energy official explaining to a congressional subcommittee how the Atomic Energy Commission had miscalculated so badly in 1969. "There were no coconuts to test and no foodstuff growing" at that time, he said, and use of the best techniques available then did not reveal the problem.

Last year, in response to the latest findings, Bikini residents were told to drink only rainwater collected in cisterns and not to eat the foods growing on the island. Instead, food would be shipped to them. Officials then set out to find another island home for them.

The most likely resettlement spot appeared to be Eneu, another island in the Bikini atoll that was thought to have received a lesser dose of fallout. But testing was required, and a verdict on Eneu was not to be available until next January.

Meanwhile, the people on Bikini did not stop eating the coconuts and other foods grown on their island, despite warnings that they were dangerous and despite the availability of noncontaminated food provided by the United States from elsewhere.

Oscar de Brum, district administrator of the Marshall Islands, according to news accounts explained to a congressional subcommittee in May that the "coconuts are treasured by the people." He said that a medical team arriving on the island in April had been offered radioactive coconuts as a gesture of friendship.

The doctors found that there had been drastic increases of cesium in the Bikini residents' bodies since last year. The Department of the Interior, which oversees the trust territory government, saw the results and decreed that the Bikinians must be moved off by the end of this month.

Early indications did not look promising for a move to Eneu, where the safety of the food supply was also under question. After consulting with the people on Bikini and the other Bikinians remaining on Kili, the High Commissioner of Micronesia, Adrian P. Winkel, decided to remove the people from Bikini back to Kili on a temporary basis.

The overall radiological survey of Bikini, Rongelap and the northern islands of the Marshalls, the one that Ataji Balos and some other Marshallese have been demanding for years, is finally to be done this fall by the departments of Defense and Energy and the Navy, and Mr. Winkel says he hopes it will show Eneu to be a safe place for the Bikinians to live.

No one is betting on it, however, and the prospect is for more years of unhappiness for the Bikinians. Interior Department officials are now predicting that it will be another 30 to 50 years before Bikini's radioactivity levels will decline sufficiently to make it a safe place to live.

When the district administrator and other officials visited Bikini last month to inform the people there of the plan to move them to Kili, the people responded by saying they would not go. Mr. de Brum hopes that was simply their way of expressing their unhappiness with their fate; he believes they will leave peacefully when the boats — and television crews to record the event — arrive later this month. Others are not so optimistic.

And what would these people, some of whom have difficulty grasping the alien idea that a coconut could be harmful, consider a reasonable alternative to life on Bikini?

Henchi Balos, hastening to note that he personally thinks it is a terrible idea, says many Bikinians remaining on Kili have been asking for a long time that they be relocated in the United States — specifically in Florida. "Somehow, the people heard the climate was similar," he explains.

TOMORROW: Work is going on to allow residents to return to Eniwetak, site of other nuclear tests.

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