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July 12, 1979

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Region IX
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PROGRAM REVIEW & MANAGEMENT
SUPPORT DIVISION
OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS/REGION IX/SF

Dear Mr. Alcedi:

I write to you concerning problems in the Marshall Islands of Micronesia that have been caused by the United States in violation of the United Nations Trusteeship Agreement and to ask for your help.

I am Marsallese, presently attending a university in Hawaii and my permanent residence is on the island of Ekepe, Iwojalein Atoll.

In this letter I am going to address some of the problems facing people here as a result of the U.S. nuclear testing program. As you are undoubtedly aware, the U.S. signed the United Nations Trusteeship Agreement in 1947, which is binding on America's administering authority of the islands. The Agreement states the U.S. is responsible to "protect the health of the inhabitants" and to "protect the inhabitants against the loss of their land and resources."

I have spent the last two months travelling throughout the Marshalls - to the many tiny outer lying atolls that can only be reached by boat - interviewing different people on the problems they have experienced from the radioactive fallout from the bomb tests. Here are some of the things I have learned:

* In 1946, prior to the first test series of "low yield" atomic bombs at Bikini, residents of Rongelap and nearby atolls were evacuated as a precaution. Eight years later, when Bravo was detonated - the largest bomb ever exploded above ground (750 times larger than earlier tests) - none of the people were evacuated and several hundred were seriously contaminated with snow like fallout on Rongelap and Utirik. American radiation monitoring personnel on an atoll close to Rongelap were evacuated shortly after the test, but the Rongelap people were not evacuated for more than 48 hours, thus compounding their radiation problems.

* In 1957 (three years after the Bravo shot), with no extensive radiological surveys conducted, the people of Rongelap were told by the Atomic Energy Commission that their atoll was safe for rehabilitation "despite slight lingering radioactivity" and allowed to return home. Following a court suit in 1975 which forced the AEC/Dept. of Energy to do a radiological survey of the northern Marshalls, the DOE's 1978 report shows that Rongelap has, on some islands, radiation levels close to Bikini's, where the tests were conducted. Bikini has been declared unlivable for 50-100 years. Despite the AEC's assurances of Rongelap's safety, the people have been living on a contaminated atoll for more than 20 years.

* The people of Utirik were also contaminated by Bravo, but with about 1/10 of the Rongelap dose. Accordingly, the AEC reassured them continually that they would have no problems - however, in 1977 there was a sudden jump in the cancer and thyroid problems equalling that of the much more heavily exposed Rongelap people. The American doctors admitted they had been completely wrong in their predictions.

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* In 1969 the AEC declared "there is virtually no radiation left" on Bikini and allowed people to be in moving back. But ten years later the radiations levels were so high in both the environment and people that they were evacuated once again in 1979, making international headlines in the process.

* The AEC knew Bikini was still "hot" in 1975 (according to their own surveys) and probably much hotter - but they ignored these potential hazards in favor of returning the people. The AEC scientists during the resettlement made statements such as Bikini "is possibly the best available source of data for evaluating the transfer of plutonium across the gut wall after being incorporated into biological systems." Perhaps they were leaving people on a dangerously contaminated island to study radiation effects?

* Once considered a staple in the Marshallese diet, arrowroot (similar to a potato), since the late 1950's, has stopped producing on every island in the Marshalls. Additionally, people from at least 15 atolls assert that the coconuts, breadfruit and other local foods either do not produce or have mutated.

* At least half a dozen islands at Bikini and Enewetak were obliterated off the face of the earth by the testing. This could hardly be called "protecting the inhabitants against the loss of their lands."

* There are numerous reports from different atolls of continuing mis-carriages, still births and ugly deformities in off spring. People from many atolls, in addition to Kongalap and Utirik, complain of sickness that they had never experienced until the last 10-15 years. Yet the AEC doctors only look at the people they consider to be "exposed" and refuse their medical service to these others.

* Brookhaven National Laboratory (on contract to the AEC/DOE) is charged with conducting regular medical checks on the exposed people and is responsible for providing for the peoples' health care. But instead the AEC doctors have consistently misled the people about their radiation exposure (the Utirik and Bikini situations are examples of this).

I submit that the radiation problems did not end with the nuclear test program in 1958 - that in fact they are just beginning to be felt. The problems here are a result of policies which have been formulated from very subjective interpretation of the radiological information and it highlights the critical need for an alternative point of view. These policies are in direct conflict with the U.S. responsibility to protect the health of the people. I strongly urge that the federal government should provide funds for scientific surveys of the islands and medical examinations of the people by independent doctors and scientists, with no connection to the DOE. And those personnel should be chosen by Marshallese.

But on top of this, I would like to invite you and representatives of your department to come to the Marshalls to investigate these and other problems first hand so that you can understand the situation here.

The U.S. has not lived up to its obligations under the U.N. Trusteeship Agreement and in many cases has been in direct violation of it. The resulting radiation problems that are now becoming evident are just part of the problem facing my people

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in the Marshalls. We need help and hope that you will be willing to look into the substantial human rights violations that are occurring this very minute in the Marshall Islands and trust you will take whatever steps you deem appropriate to help correct this situation.

I am looking forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Darlene Keju