

TRUST TERRITORY OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

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Office of the High Commissioner

In reply refer to:  
Ser 0598

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Feb. 5, 1953

Mr. James P. Davis, Director  
Office of Territories  
Department of the Interior  
Washington 25, D. C.

This document consists of 3 pages  
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Dear Mr. Davis:

Your letters of January 9 and January 21, 1953 which forwarded the Atomic Energy Commission's proposals for continued use of Bikini Atoll, and extension of the contingent Danger Area, present problems that are difficult for me to resolve because of my responsibilities to the people of the islands.

I fully appreciate the importance of the work the AEC is doing and quite naturally I am anxious to do everything in my power to forward it. On the other hand, these proposed moves will be of vital importance to the three hundred people of Bikini and Rongelap. They will also seriously concern all Marshallese as these people are quite aware of the effect that the Bikini and Eniwetok experiments have had on the former residents of those atolls. Their reaction to an enlargement of the area of activity will be apprehension, and fear that future extensions may place any of them in the same homeless position as the Bikini people now occupy.

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The extension of the eastward limit of the danger area to 166° 28' east longitude includes about two thirds of Ailinginae Atoll within the danger area. This atoll, although not "inhabited" in the sense that people are permanently domiciled there, is regularly used and harvested by the people of Rongelap and contributes a substantial part of their living. It is owned by the Iroij of the area and, while it is geographically a separate atoll, it is politically, socially, and economically an integral part of Rongelap. These northern atolls of the Marshall Islands are poor. They offer only the most meagre living for the inhabitants. The removal of Ailinginae, or even part of it, from the economic orbit of Rongelap could be expected to result in critically lowered living standards and it might force migration of part of the population to other area to maintain the subsistence balance of the atolls.

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There is also no question that such an incursion on their lands will result in serious social repercussions in these islands that might readily extend throughout the Marshalls as was previously pointed out. While it is impossible to predict the exact nature of the reactions, experience has shown that the most probable result would be first, a lowering of morale with a consequent reluctance to fend for themselves, followed by the expectation that the Government would provide their food in return for the land that had been taken. Monetary remuneration for the land cannot be expected to prevent this phenomena as money in itself cannot replace the value of land to these people. To them land, and the lagoons that they fish in, are the only assets which they recognize that they can depend upon to feed them. Where they understand and accept a scarcity of fish or poor land crops, and adjust admirably to either, they have no appreciation of why money will not always buy food in the amount and variety they are used to. In fact, land and their fishing grounds are the only assets that can assure these islanders freedom from fear and want.

You are aware, I believe, of what the reactivation of Bikini will mean to the Bikini people and to our administration as we have both written and discussed the matter at length. We are doing all we can to relocate these people, but even should land be found where they can be resettled, they will remain a "displaced population" for generations unless they can be returned to Bikini in the near future. They are becoming increasingly restless and increasingly resistant to their present life as time goes by. Because of their complete dissatisfaction with their lot they are losing all sense of responsibility for their own welfare and are becoming a greater problem to the government and the Marshallese people each year. We cannot look forward to assimilation of these people into the rest of the Marshallese population because of their inherent ethnocentricity which has become stronger with each move that has been forced upon them. They are strongly resistant to accepting outsiders into their community and they refuse to divide their group or to migrate individually to more promising locations. They feel that they have been badly used by the government of the United States, and they resent it. I am afraid that I must agree with them.

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In addition to the effect of this extension of the area of atomic activity on the people themselves, the administration will be faced with constantly increasing expense to counteract social conflicts that generate from loss of homelands, and that will arise through fear of further encroachment by the U. S. government. This is not a fanciful prediction as this fear has already been expressed in some quarters as a result of the activity last fall. That the Marshallese are poignantly aware of the scarcity of land in their islands has been evidenced by the actions of their Congress at each session in requesting the return of expropriated lands and in asking that no more of their lands be sold to outsiders. What they probably are not fully aware of is that at the present rate of increase, they may very well double their population in the next thirty years.

In view of these prospects, I find it difficult to accept the proposals of the Atomic Energy Commission even with full realization of the significance of the work they are doing. I do urge you to do everything in your power to limit the boundaries of the proposed Danger Area to exclude Ailinginae Atoll in its entirety, as well as any other atolls or islands in the Marshalls other than Bikini and Eniwetok. Location of the eastern boundary at 166° 17' east is one manner in which this could be accomplished, or the proposed line could diverge from the meridian to pass to the westward around Ailinginae, say three miles off shore. This would at least avoid the necessity of informing the Marshallese of the expanded Danger Area and so protect them and the administration from the results of what would be, at the very best, unsettling knowledge for them to have.

Sincerely yours,

ELBERT D. THOMAS  
High Commissioner

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