

MARSHALL ISLANDS FIELD REPORT

(March 4 - April 7, 1981)

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CULTURAL IMPACT OF THE U.S. ATOMIC TESTING PROGRAM

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by Glenn Alcalay

Bikini and Enewetak, and the number of thyroid operations will only increase in the future. The people of Enewetak are making a big mistake by going back there and the United States should not permit it. Also, the people of Bikini should never go back to their home island.

I have had many problems with childbearing. My first baby lived for a very short time--several minutes--but was not healthy and did not move around much when it was born. I was very sad and confused because I was healthy then, and then when I thought about it I remembered that I had 'poison' in my body and that is why the baby died. Later another baby was born and it too died shortly after birth. Then I had a miscarriage after four months. Now I am always afraid when I am pregnant, and this fear is shared by all of the women on Utirik and Rongelap. Even my healthy children may someday get radiation diseases.

We would like very much independent doctors to help us understand what is wrong with us, as we feel that the AEC doctors are not honestly telling us what our problems are."

JOHN ANJAIN (Age: 61)

"I was magistrate on Rongelap in 1954. Before that time while I was in Majuro, a fellow who worked with the AEC stuck out the tip of his finger--about a half-inch or so--and said, "John, your life is just about that long." When I asked him what he meant, he explained that they were setting off a bomb on Bikini soon. I asked him why they did not move the people of Rongelap first, and he told me that they had not gotten word from Washington to evacuate the people beforehand.

On the morning of the 'bomb,' I was awake and drinking coffee. I thought I saw what appeared to be the sunrise, but it was in the west. It was truly beautiful with many colors--red, green and yellow--and I was surprised. A little while later the sun rose in the east. Then sometime later something like smoke filled the entire sky and shortly after that a strong and warm wind--as in a typhoon--swept across Rongelap. Then all of the people heard the great sound of the explosion. Some people began to cry with fright. Several hours later the powder began to fall on Rongelap. We saw four planes fly overhead, and we thought perhaps the planes had dropped this powder, which covered our island and stuck to our bodies. The visibility was less than one-half mile at that time due to the haze in the sky.

The next day, early in the morning, I looked at all of the catchments with Jabwe (the health aide) and Billiet (the school principal), and we noticed that the water had turned to yellow.

I then warned the people not to drink from these water catchments, and told them to only drink 'ni' ('coconuts'). Then people began to get sick with vomiting, aches all over the body, eye irritations, and general weakness and fatigue. After the second day most of the people were unable to move around as usual due to their fatigue. Just a few strong young men were up and about at that time, and I asked them to fetch some coconuts for the rest of us to drink. On the evening of the second day a seaplane arrived from Enewetak with two men who brought some strange machines. They stayed only about twenty minutes and they took some readings of water catchments and soil, and then they took off again. They really did not tell us very much.

On the morning of the third day a Navy destroyer came and told me, "John Anjain, you have to leave this island at once or you and your people will die." We were allowed to bring only what we were wearing--nothing else. At this time most of the people were feeling quite dizzy--as if drunk--and they were very weak. From Rongelap we went to Ailinginae to pick up the eighteen people who were getting fish there. Then we went to Kwajalein.

In Kwajalein we were very sick and in much pain, with body burns and bleeding on our necks and feet. After one week the doctors came from the States--Drs. Cronkite, Conard, and the medical team. They made us bathe three times a day because they said our illnesses were of a new type and there was no medicine for us.

After some time they moved the Utirik people over to Ebeye and said that they had 'no poison,' and that we had 'just a little poison.' After three months they took us to Ejit Island in Majuro. The United States caused us much discomfort and misery at that time, and we all suffered much illness and weakness.

Then in 1957 they returned us to Rongelap. At the time of our return the High Commissioner and some representatives from the United Nations Trusteeship Council came to our island. We asked them if it was safe to return to our island and they all agreed that there was still a little bit of radiation left on Rongelap, and that it might injure our health, but not very much. With that slight reassurance, we returned, but we had much fear then.

After our return, many women began to have problems with childbearing. On several occasions, women gave birth to creatures which did not resemble human beings: some of these creatures looked like monkeys, some like octopuses, and some like bunches of grapes. One baby was born, and though it was very large, it did not have a complete head, and after three days it died. The people complained repeatedly about these deformities--we were really scared--but the AEC doctors told us not to worry because 'there was just a little bit of radiation left on Rongelap.'

In 1963 the thyroid problems started to occur. In 1969 the

AEC took my son Lekoij and two other children to New York for their thyroid problems. In 1972 they noticed that the white blood cell count of my son was very low. They took him to Honolulu for blood transfusions and Dr. Conard told me that he would be alright. Then they notified me to go to Washington where they had taken my son. I arrived at the hospital and saw that my son's condition was very serious and that he was very weak. I will never forget being in Washington with my son--I have never felt such sadness in all of my life. He died a day later from leukemia.

After this I went to Hiroshima and Nagasaki with members of the Congress of Micronesia to request help from independent doctors, but the Trust Territory government would not allow these doctors to visit Rongelap and Utirik, and this made me suspicious. Later on, these doctors from Japan--who only made it as far as Majuro before they were forced to return to Japan--reported that we should not have returned to Rongelap in 1957.

At the present time the people of Rongelap are forbidden to use the northern part of their atoll. They are really scared up there and wonder if perhaps they should move away from that place entirely. Many Rongelap and Utirik people refuse to return and live in their former islands and choose to live in Ebeye and Majuro instead.

[From the beginning of the testing program in our islands the United States has treated us like animals in a scientific experiment for their studies. They come and study us like animals and think of us as 'guinea pigs.' We are the 'guinea pigs.']