

# NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR RADIATION VICTIMS

OPERATION EXODUS:

A Sociocultural Analysis  
of the 1985 Rongelap Evacuation  
in the Marshall Islands

by

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we were chickens and pigs. I do not understand how the United States can do this to my people.

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SENATOR JETON ANJAIN: Sen. Anjain was born on March 25, 1933 in Jaluit Atoll. Having received his intermediate education in Majuro, Sen. Anjain attended the Navy's School of Medical Assistance at Guam in 1949. At the outbreak of the Korean War, Sen. Anjain was transferred to Fiji's Central Medical School, where he graduated with a degree in dentistry in 1954. After having practiced dentistry for many years in Majuro in the Marshall Islands, he was appointed the Minister of Health when the new Republic of the Marshall Islands government was formed in 1979, and held that post until his resignation in 1983. As the Rongelap representative to the Nitajela (Parliament), Sen. Anjain has resided on Majuro Atoll for many years. Sen. Anjain plans to relocate to Mejato Island so that he can be closer to his constituents.

Q: Why are the people moving from Rongelap?

A: We have been here since 1957 when we were relocated back from Ejit Island in Majuro after "Bravo," and we did not know the full extent of the damage caused by that nuclear test. After the 1978 aerial radiological survey of the Northern Marshalls, we were told in 1979 that the northern half of Rongelap Atoll would be off-limits and quarantined due to dangerous levels of residual radiation. When the people were told about the damage to the northern half of their atoll they became very afraid.

Since 1979 the people feel that the DOE scientists have not really been telling them the truth. Actually their

distrust of the DOE goes back much further than 1979, but it was then that things really got bad. The people have become extremely worried about the health of their children, as they feel that this is more important than anything else in the world.

Even though the people love these islands at Rongelap, they have made the decision that they should move away from Rongelap to other places they feel are more safe to raise their children. The decision to move to Mejato Island was based on a careful consideration of the children's future, as well as on the fears of radiation on Rongelap. That is why the people are evacuating.

Q: Can you please explain more fully about the DOE Booklet you referred to earlier? (Please see Appendix.)

A: In a part of the 1982 booklet entitled "The Meaning of Radiation for Those Atolls in the Northern Part of the Marshall Islands That Were Surveyed in 1978," it is clearly stated (on page 39) that the people of Rongelap are not allowed to visit the northern islands in the atoll because of heavy contamination. The people logically asked, "If one-half of our atoll is off-limits because of dangerous levels of radiation, what about Rongelap Island itself, the main island where we reside?" When the people eat the fish, turtles, sea birds, it is impossible to tell which part of the atoll these foods came from. The people feel that they are being lied to by the DOE. My people are not stupid, and they are able to use reason to think about these things. If one-half of the atoll is bad, they know that presumably the entire atoll is bad, and because of that, they distrust the DOE.

Q: Can you tell me about the number scale used in the DOE booklet which compares Rongelap with Bikini?

A: In the 1982 DOE booklet, a number scale from one to four was used to represent levels of radiation, with one being low and four being high. On pages 8-9 of the booklet, we find that Rongelap is more heavily contaminated than several islands at Bikini. If the Bikini people were evacuated in 1978 after their attempted relocation, and if we see in the DOE booklet that many of our islands have more radiation than some islands at Bikini, then we should be relocated also. That is precisely why we are evacuating at this time.

Q: Can you tell me how this revelation in the 1982 DOE booklet has affected the Rongelap people?

A: The people have been talking to me about radiation all along after the 1954 "Bravo" bomb test. But after the 1982 DOE booklet came out, I noticed a distinct psychological difference among the people. The people said, "Why should we stay here when we are living under a constant fear - day and night - for the health of our children?"

Q: What exactly do you mean by a "psychological difference?"

A: In the past (before "Bravo") the people used to be very active and energetic. Following several decades of illness and disease, I have seen a gradual decrease in the activity level of the people of Rongelap. This general trend of diminished activity became very serious following the 1982 DOE booklet and the warning not to use our northern islands. I have noticed in recent years a great decline in activity, and notice that people sit around more and seem much more preoccupied with their situation than ever before. The people are not very active today.

Q: What sorts of things do you suppose the people are

thinking about?

A: I know they are thinking about their children because they have told me that if they stay any longer on Rongelap the entire population will be completely wiped out by radiation.

Q: Jeton, can you please tell me about the distrust the Rongelap people feel toward the DOE and the United States Government, as mentioned previously?

A: From the beginning of our experience with the DOE, we have been continually told that there is nothing wrong with our island. In contrast with their reassurances, we see that our illnesses are not going away, and we see our children continuing to suffer from strange diseases that we never had before the radioactive fallout came to our atoll.

Q: As I look around Rongelap right now I see something similar to a "ghost town." Can you please tell me what your future plans are concerning Rongelap and Mejato?

A: Our plan right now is as follows: If Congress could release the \$300,000 for our radiological survey (as was recommended by Congressman John Seiberling at a recent Compact hearing), and if some independent scientists (see Appendix for IFEU proposal for radiological monitoring of Rongelap) could come and study our islands and produce a report for my people to read (in Marshallese), we could make an intelligent decision about what to do - whether to return to Rongelap, or perhaps to remain permanently on Mejato Island.

While in Washington some weeks back, I spoke with Bernd Franke of the IFEU group of West Germany, and I

now have a proposal for how an independent radiological survey should be conducted at Rongelap. I trust this group, and Dr. Rosalie Bertell (a biostatistician and noted radiation expert with the International Institute of Concern for Public Health in Toronto) very much, and welcome their participation in an independent survey after more than three decades of only having U.S. government agencies performing the surveys. And I also think that you (Glenn) should accompany the survey team as well.

Q: What do you think the Rongelap people will do if this independent radiation team determines that Rongelap may be reinhabited, but that there will be some health risks and probable problems in the future?

A: At the moment, I feel that our move is only a temporary one pending the outcome of a truly independent radiological survey of Rongelap. If an independent survey determines that we may move back, but that there will be additional problems, I really don't think the people will want to move back after having made the move to Mejato Island. We want to live without any fear for our future health, and if we were to move back to Rongelap knowing that there may be future problems, the people would continue to worry and suffer.

Q: We are all quite familiar with the extreme hardships suffered by the Bikini and Enewetak people following their evacuations. What sorts of hardships do you think the Rongelap people will suffer being away from their home Atoll?

A: I know the Rongelap people will get very homesick and will be very anxious to return home: Rongelap is their atoll - they were born there and their ancestors are buried there. But I truly don't think they will return if it is

not safe because of the lingering radioactivity and the possibility of future health problems. The people are more concerned about their children's health and well-being than about their own feelings. The people know that they have radiation in their bodies and that their lives will be shortened and diminished - they know that they will not live much longer. They feel that their children take precedence over their personal feelings of being homesick for Rongelap.

Q: Can you tell me about the Nitajela (Parliament of the Republic of the Marshall Islands) resolution of 1983 whereby the Parliament voted to endorse the Rongelap evacuation? (Please see the Nitajela resolution number 25 of August 11, 1983 in the Appendix.)

A: President Amata Kabua co-sponsored the resolution during the Fourth Constitutional Regular Session of 1983 with me, and it was passed unanimously. I am very grateful to the President for his co-sponsorship of the resolution. The problem though came when I tried to obtain the necessary funding to make our move from Rongelap possible, and due to the Government's financial problems, I was unable to secure any financial assistance. I am grateful to my Government for the assistance they provided the people of Rongelap in terms of giving us a shipment of USDA food. I have asked the U.S. Congress for financial assistance for our relocation to Mejato, and I have learned that Congressman Seiberling has recommended \$3.5 million for our relocation, of which \$300,000 of this amount would go toward an independent radiological survey of Rongelap and the balance for the relocation itself.

Q: Can you tell me how the environmental group "Greenpeace" became involved in the Rongelap evacuation?

A: Last February (1984), the Pacific Concerns Resource Center had their annual meeting in Honolulu, and they sent me their year's priorities by mail. When I glanced over their priorities, I saw Belau, Kwajalein, and other certain island nations in the South Pacific listed, but I did not see Rongelap. So I wrote to Giff Johnson - a PCRC steering committee member - and said, "Hey Giff, I don't see Rongelap on PCRC's list of priorities. Why are not the Rongelap people allied with the United States' 'atomic veterans' (i.e., the approximately 250,000 former U.S. service personnel who were exposed to radioactive fallout from the atmospheric nuclear testing program between 1945 and 1962)? The world only knows about the 'atomic veterans': The world knows nothing about the Rongelap people."

At that time, PCRC started looking around for some assistance for the Rongelap people, and they got in contact with Greenpeace.

Q: And now that the evacuation is nearly complete, how do you feel about Greenpeace?

A: I think Greenpeace is comprised of the most kind-hearted people on earth, and we are very grateful to them for their help and commitment.

Q: Jeton, could we please return to the question of the distrust you mentioned the Rongelap people feel toward the DOE doctors and scientists?

A: The people of Rongelap do not trust the United States government because of how they have been treated over the years - first by the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), then by the Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA), and finally by the Department of Energy (DOE). They keep changing the name of the agency that comes to monitor my people, but they never change the people.



And when the DOE doctors continually tell us that "everything at Rongelap is okay," we ask why they need to come to Rongelap twice a year to monitor our health?

The distrust really started quite early on when they came to our island after 1954 and found many sick people, and then said, "These illnesses are not radiation-related and occur in all parts of the world." They also said that we would have to be treated by our own government for many of the illnesses they said were not radiation-related, which was an insult to us because they knew that our own government was not equipped to treat our people - especially in the outer islands - and we knew that the DOE doctors did not want us to use up their research money for referrals whereby my people could have received better treatment than could be given by my own government.

When they send somebody like Harry Brown (who is the Honolulu-based representative for the Department of Energy's Marshall Islands program), I know something is wrong with the program. Every time Harry Brown comes to our islands, he brings the people small gifts of food, and as the people are eating the food, he mimics the sounds of a chicken eating as if to say that my people are like chickens.

Additionally, we see the thyroid problems getting worse over time, and things are not improving with our children and the babies being born. So these are some of the reasons we do not trust the DOE and the U.S. government.

Q: Do you think the medical problems are going away, staying the same, or getting worse over time?

A: I think things are getting worse. A great percentage of newborn infants are born with handicaps. The Brookhaven National Laboratory reports (which I have recently obtained) show that about 50-percent of the Rongelap children are born with heart problems, as well as with ear and eye problems.

Q: And these problems did not exist before the fallout?

A: My people were once a very healthy and vibrant people: We never had the kinds of diseases we now see running through-out our affected people.

Q: What about the United Nations? It has been nearly forty years since the Trusteeship Council has overseen the Trust Territory: In your opinion, has the U.N. been helpful to your people?

A: The United Nations has done nothing for us from the very beginning. Every year they visit us and see all sorts of problems here, and then they tell us they will go back and study the problems. But when they come back, they have done nothing.

Not only that, the U.N. Trusteeship Council members (i.e., France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and China - which does not participate) have an agreement with the Administering Authority (i.e., the United States), except for the Soviet Union which asks tough questions about how the U.S. has administered Micronesia.

I know that the promises the U.S. made to the United Nations in 1947 have never been fulfilled. As you can see, our economy, health, education are still in nearly the same state as when the Trusteeship began.

Q: Concerning economic development: Do you believe that economic underdevelopment in the Trust Territory was the result of U.S. neglect, or was it intentional and part of a larger policy created in Washington?

A: The people of Micronesia are nearly totally dependent on the U.S. economically, health-wise, and educationally.

I think the U.S. created this dependency so that they could make the Micronesians feel they owe the U.S. something. This dependency was created to obligate Micronesians to allow the U.S. to use our islands for military purposes. The U.S. makes us try to feel that we owe the U.S. something because they give us "free" U.S.D.A. food, and they make it hard for us to refuse their requests for military demands. That is why the U.S. made us dependent - because of military reasons.

Q: Some people in Washington feel that the U.S. gives the people of Micronesia "welfare" and that people take advantage of the United States' generosity. How do you feel about that attitude?

A: I don't think the U.S. has performed well out here: For example, at the Kwajalein Missile Range, I am not grateful to the U.S. for what they have created at Ebeye and at the missile base.

Q: Your islands are the hardest hit by the development of nuclear weapons, ongoing radiation studies among your people, and now with the development of President Reagan's "Star Wars" Strategic Defense Initiative, as well as anti-satellite and other complex technologies which will further the arms race. As a result of the development of these technologies in your islands, do you feel more, or less, secure?

A: I feel very much less secure. After testing nuclear weapons and missiles in my islands, our people are really ill and weakened. That is why I am having to move them away from contaminated Rongelap. The United States may as well have killed my people outright instead of continuing with all of their pain and suffering of the past thirty-one years.

Q: What would you like history to record about the Rongelap experience?

A: That we should all fight nuclear development: I think nuclear development will just wipe out the entire world. The people of Rongelap think about these things because they are experiencing the results of nuclear testing. They were just innocent people who did not know that someone was going to poison them by exploding a thermonuclear weapon upwind of them at Bikini. The people were not forewarned or evacuated as they had been in 1946 when the Navy took the people of Rongelap to Lae Atoll as a precaution for "Operation Crossroads" at Bikini.

From reading the 1982 Defense Nuclear Agency report, I have learned that the U.S. knew six hours before the detonation of "Bravo" that winds at certain altitudes were heading for Rongelap - but mysteriously they went ahead with the ill-fated bomb test.

I quote directly from Dr. Robert Conard (the former principal investigator of the Brookhaven medical program to monitor the Marshallese) in his 1980 report where it says the Rongelap people are the best source of data about the effects of fallout on human beings, and I believe that this is the reason they did not forewarn or evacuate my people during the "Bravo" test. They wanted to learn how to treat fallout victims, so they left these people on Rongelap so they could use them for that purpose. We are the forgotten 'guinea pigs.' They poisoned us, covered up their crime, and now they use my people as animals for their studies.

This is another reason for the evacuation: I do not want any more DOE scientists to use my people for studies. We shall now ban the DOE surveys. . . With the new Four-Atoll Health Care Plan (i.e., the plan initiated by former

Congressman Phil Burton, and presently championed by Congressman John Seiberling, which will be administered by the Interior Department and implemented by the newly-awarded contractor John A. Short and Associates of Columbia, Maryland) to begin in August, we will no longer need the DOE.

Q: What will life be like now that you have moved to Mejato Island?

A: In terms of logistical support, Mejato is closer to the hospital at Ebeye than was Rongelap. Also, this move is temporary pending the outcome of the independent radiological survey of Rongelap: We are long overdue for an independent analysis of our atoll.

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LIAM ANJAIN: This 58-year old Rongelap woman is the sister of Senator Jeton Anjain. Liam was one of the very last to leave Rongelap during the evacuation to Mejato Island, and the interview was conducted on Rongelap just a few hours before the final journey to Mejato. (Born 12/17/26 in Rongelap.)

Q: What are your thoughts about the move to Mejato Island?

A: I have extreme sadness about the move my people are making away from Rongelap. This is my island of birth, and it is where I grew up. However, if the people feel that we should move, then I suppose I too will move.

Q: Why do you suppose the people are moving away from here?