

NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR RADIATION VICTIMS

OPERATION EXODUS:

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

by

Glenn H. Alcalay

National Committee for Radiation Victims

Washington, D.C.

July 2, 1985

community houses.

Q: Why are the people of Rongelap moving to Mejato Island?

A: The people are moving because their home atoll has poison and is not a good place to live. When I was younger, I did not understand the problems associated with the poison on our islands. When the Department of Energy (DOE) came to Rongelap, I knew something was wrong, but did not understand exactly what was happening.

Many people are very ill now with thyroid problems, breathing problems (respiratory), and problems with the children.

I do not believe that the people here will be healthy in the future due to the poison. I do not know what our future holds for us, whether we will be allowed to return to Rongelap, or whether we will be forced to remain on Mejato Island.

I am angry at the United States for destroying my islands and my people, and the U.S. needs to help us with our problems that they caused.

The Compact of Free Association - and especially Section 177 - is not good for my people, and I would like our court cases to go forward.

*

KIOSANG KIOS: This 46-year old woman was born on Rongelap Atoll on March 6, 1939. She was interviewed on the ship "Micro Pilot" on her way back to Rongelap for the evacuation.

Q: Can you please tell me about your recollections of what

happened to you during the March 1, 1954 "Bravo" bomb test?

A: At the time of "Bravo," I was fifteen years old. I saw a bright flash of light, felt a big wind, and heard a loud explosion. Then the sky turned dark and a powder fell from the sky. This powder made my skin itch, and all I felt like doing was sleeping. I generally felt lousy.

A day later a seaplane came to Rongelap and two men checked our island with strange machines they held in their hands. They only stayed about an hour and did not tell us anything or explain anything to us. We now find that very peculiar.

After two days we were evacuated by a Navy destroyer to Kwajalein. They made us throw our clothes away, and gave us bathing suits made of underwear - it was very embarrassing for us as this went against our custom of personal modesty.

When we left our island, our bodies were aching - my feet were burning and I couldn't walk without much pain due to the sores from the poison.

At Kwajalein my hair fell out, as did about half of the other peoples' at that time. My feet ached and burned. I had a loss of appetite, diarrhea, and vomiting. I had much fear of what was happening because we did not know what was going on, and nobody bothered to tell us anything.

In 1957, after we had been living on Ejit Island (at Majuro Atoll) following our relocation after "Bravo," I had my first baby, and it was born without any bones. Like this piece of paper (she feels the paper I am writing on), it was flimsy. The baby lived for only one-half a day.

After that, I had several more stillbirths and miscarriages. In 1959 I had a girl who has severe problems with her legs and feet, and she has thyroid problems also.

Some years ago I had an operation on my neck and on my arm. I now have many health problems and have great pains in my chest, and my eyes are failing me.

Q: Why are the people of Rongelap evacuating their home?

A: The Rongelap people really fear the poison in their islands, and so have decided to evacuate. I do not know if we will be allowed to ever return. The people are really sad about leaving home.

I am very upset with the United States because they have tampered with our health and our islands.

Can you please tell me: Do you have medicine (or a substance) that can remove the poison from our bodies and our islands? I have a request for the United States: Can you please get rid of the poison from our bodies and islands which you brought to us?

The U.S. came to our islands to test their bombs, and now we are suffering as a consequence: I ask "Why?"

*

BONEMEJ NAMWE: This 62-year old woman was born on September 28, 1922 on Kwajalein Atoll, and has since lived on Rongelap.

Q: Why are you leaving Rongelap Atoll?

A: I am leaving my home of Rongelap because we have a problem with poison on our island, and we must move away. Perhaps with God's willingness we may be allowed to return someday.

Although Mejato Island is much smaller than Rongelap - and is much less productive - it does have a good supply of groundwater, and for that we are grateful. I ask that the United States assist us in our move as we need help.

I am angry with the United States because they have never really helped us; rather they exploded bombs on our islands and continue to use our people for studying as if