

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

AISEN TIMA: Born on October 23, 1953 in Rongelap, this 31-year old man was just five months old at the time of the "Bravo" fallout. Aisen was one of the first to have his thyroid gland surgically removed as a late effect of irradiation to fallout, and the thyroidectomy was performed in 1964 in Boston.

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

A: We are moving because we have a real problem with poison on our atoll, and people are really afraid to stay on this contaminated island.

Q: Do you think you will ever return to Rongelap?

A: I don't know if this is just a temporary move, or if we will have to permanently abandon our home.

Q: Can you tell me about the radiation here on Rongelap?

A: Many years ago in 1954 - when I was just five months old - a large bomb was exploded at Bikini. After radioactive fallout contaminated Rongelap and several other atolls, my people were evacuated to Kwajalein and then to Majuro. The U.S. caused us great hardships back then, and we still continue to suffer from the effects of the nuclear tests.

It is obvious to me that our islands were used by the U.S. because they saw us as low-class, and they did not really care about our safety and health. They set us up so that they could study the effects of radiation among my people.

I was one of the first to have my thyroid removed in the U.S., and I must take a pill ("Synthroid") every

day for the rest of my life.

We feel compelled to move at present due to our fears of what will happen in the future if we remain on Rongelap.

Q: What do you think about the United Nations as it relates to the problems on Rongelap?

A: I really don't understand the workings of the U.N. It has been nearly forty years of U.N. Trusteeship, and I cannot think of one positive thing the U.N. has done for my people.

Q: What do you think about the Compact of Free Association?

A: The Compact itself is alright, but Section 177 (the portion which deals with the radiation claims) is very bad for my people. Section 177 will leave us without access to United States courts for problems we have now, and problems we will have in the future.

I have two young girls of my own, and I fear that if something happens to their health in the future, Section 177 will prevent me from seeking justice in the U.S. courts.

Q: The elders of Rongelap tell me that they are not so concerned about their own health because soon they will pass away. They say that the move to Mejato is really because of their fears of what may happen to the children. What are your thoughts about this?

A: It is true: the elders here will die before too long, but the children have a long life ahead of them. We now understand that some of the radiation will remain for up to 25,000 years and maybe longer. I believe that the children are at higher risk (see for example Dr. John Gofman's 1980 statement at the AAAS symposium, included in Appendix)

than the adults because they will be exposed to radiation for a longer period of time.

Q: Do you have any special requests from either Congress or the United Nations?

A: What we need at the present time is a truly independent radiation survey to assess the radiological contamination of Rongelap, and to help us determine what possible health problems are in store for us if we return to Rongelap.

Also, I wish to say that I greatly appreciate all of your help over the years. My relatives have told me a lot about your helping my people, and I wish to thank you for your help.

Finally, please tell the people in Washington to delete Section 177 from the Compact.

*

ROSE KEJU: This 58-year old woman was born on Lae Atoll on March 18, 1927, and married a man from Rongelap. She was in Lae during the 1954 "Bravo" test, and has since lived for several decades on Rongelap.

Q: Can you please tell me about the move to Mejato and what it means for the Rongelap people?

A: It is an extremely hard time for us now because we do not have a lot of food here on Mejato Island. We do not have breadfruit or pandanus trees, nor do we have arrowroot; just coconut trees.