

326
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

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news releaseFor Release August 25, 1978Folder MARSHALL ISLANDS Kallman (202) 343-3171
July - Dec, 1978RELOCATION OF BIKINI ISLAND PEOPLE WILL BEGIN AUGUST 28

Relocation to Kili Island of 145 people living on Bikini Island will begin August 27, 1978, U. S. Mainland time, the Department of the Interior announced today.

(The Marshall Islands are WEST of the International Dateline. Relocation operations will begin Monday, August 28, Marshall Islands time.)

In confirming the date the operation will begin, Under Secretary of the Interior James A. Joseph announced that work will commence "forthwith" to build a new dispensary, a new school, an addition to the church, and an addition to the civic assembly building on Kili -- all temporary structures expected to be completed in the fall of 1978. Permanent structures will take their place as rapidly as possible, Joseph added.

"We have constructed temporary housing to accommodate the returning residents," Joseph said.

"This is only the beginning of our commitment to provide for the total rehabilitation of Kili Island. Trust Territory High Commissioner Adrian Winkel and we are moving to prepare a total resettlement program for the Bikini people that includes adequate housing, permanent community buildings, and a dock to provide access to the island."

Joseph added, "After full consultation with the Bikinians, the Government will develop plans for relocation of those residents who wish to move elsewhere. The Bikini people have some land rights on nearby Jaluit atoll and some may wish to settle there."

Under Secretary Joseph and Ruth G. Van Cleve, Director of the Office of Territorial Affairs, left Washington, D. C. August 4 and went to Kili to inspect the temporary housing and other facilities being constructed there by the Trust Territory Government. They then traveled to Bikini on August 11, to meet with the islanders and assure them that the relocation was necessary for health reasons.

Bikini Atoll still contains radioactive health hazards as a result of nuclear testing conducted there more than 30 years ago. It is part of the Marshall Island group in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands administered by the United States under a trusteeship agreement with the United Nations.

In 1946 the U. S. asked the people of Bikini for permission to use the atoll as a testing area. The people agreed to leave Bikini and were ultimately settled on Kili Island in the southern Marshalls.

Radiological surveys performed by the U. S. Atomic Energy Commission in 1968 said Bikini was again safe for human habitation and President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered a complete rehabilitation of the atoll. Plans were made to create a model community on the island and then return the Bikinians to their traditional home.

(More)

When restoration work began in 1970, Bikini islanders from Kili were hired to assist in the rehabilitation project. They gradually brought their families and other relatives to Bikini. It is this group, now numbering 145, that will be rejoined with the 400 Bikinians on Kili.

Lingering radiation was discovered on Bikini Island when the people decided in 1974 to have some of the new houses being built by the Government erected in the interior part of the island.

Since inland areas had not been considered for residential purposes before, the U. S. Government decided to conduct a full radiological survey before the start of inland construction.

The survey, completed in June 1975, revealed that the interior could not be used for residential purposes. It also showed that food plants were recycling radionuclides from the island's soil.

Food subsidies have been provided to Bikini residents since 1972 and after the 1975 survey they were cautioned not to eat locally-grown foods.

Fish in the waters around Bikini are considered to be safe to eat, but fruits, vegetables and coconut crabs found on the island are contaminated.

In November 1977 the Trust Territory Government instituted a complete feeding program for all residents of Bikini.

Regular health monitoring in April of this year revealed an increase in the level of cesium-137 in the bodies of some Bikinians despite the diet of imported foodstuffs.

The potential danger is considered to be much more serious for young people and since nearly half of the island's current residents are under 15 years of age, early relocation of the entire population was given a high priority by Trust Territory and Interior Department officials.

Bikini Atoll is being re-surveyed by the U. S. Department of Energy, using advanced technology that is significantly more accurate and reliable than that available for the 1968 AEC survey.

The new technique uses gamma-ray detectors mounted on aircraft. It was recently used to survey Enewetak Atoll.

The aerial survey by DOE began July 31, 1978, and will include Bikini Atoll and the northern Marshall Islands. Survey results are expected by the Spring of 1979.

Three ships will sail from Majuro to Bikini during the week to transport the people and their possessions to Kili Island.

Representatives of virtually every major news-gathering organization in the U. S., Europe and Asia are aboard one of the ships to observe and report on the relocation.

DOE ARCHIVES

Depending on weather conditions, the move to Kili is expected to be completed by September 5, 1978.