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Front Page	Edit Page	Other Page
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22 years after Bikini nuclear blast

Islanders still treated for radiation

Fourth in a series

By MATTHEW J. SEIDEN

Star Staff Correspondent

Kwajalein Atoll, the Marshall Islands—Twenty-two years ago, the United States set off, on Bikini Atoll here in the mid-Pacific, the largest thermonuclear blast it has ever exploded—a 17-megaton device nearly a thousand times more powerful than the bomb which leveled Hiroshima in August, 1945.

At the time of the Bikini explosion, Ellen Boas was a 23-year-old mother of five, living peacefully on the remote island of Rongelap, less than 100 miles east of Bikini, and more than 4,000 miles from the U.S. West Coast.

Since that memorable day in March, 1954, when she awoke to a clap of thunder and saw "a big ball of red in the western sky," she and three of her children have had their thyroids removed because of radiation damage, and now Mrs. Boas is undergoing tests on suspicious bumps that have begun to appear on her head.

Mrs. Boas, who spent the night at the U.S. missile range here recently as she began her third voyage to American research hospitals, was one of

about 240 islanders, 28 American servicemen and 23 Japanese fishermen exposed to radiation from the Bikini Atoll test blast.

Despite the nearness of Mrs. Boas's native island to Bikini, Rongelap's 86 residents were neither warned of the explosion nor offered passage to a more distant island. U.S. officials said the radiation exposure was caused by a sudden shift in wind which blew the deadly fallout in an unexpected direction.

"After the thunder, the big red ball lasted for half an hour, and then the white snow began to fall and it lasted for 12 hours," said Mrs. Boas, who now has 13 children and 5 grandchildren. "Soon our skin started to itch and form blisters and one man went blind because he let the snow fall on his eyes, hoping it would cure his cataracts."

Since the explosion, which was code-named "Bravo,"

more than 35 per cent of the people who were on Rongelap have developed radiation-induced "thyroid lesions," some of which have developed into cancer. Nineteen, like Mrs. Boas and her children, have had their thyroids removed.

The thyroid cancers were discovered eight years ago when two Rongelap youths suddenly stopped growing, a phenomenon eventually attributed to a radiation-induced thyroid problem.

Later, an 18-year-old boy who had been a fetus at the time of the explosion died of leukemia. More recently, doctors have discovered an increase in strange kidney disorders. Now they are concerned about the unusual bumps on Mrs. Boas's head.

In addition, an official of the U.S. Energy Research and Development Administration said, "an undetermined number of others have died due to medical reasons aggravated by the radioactive fallout."

One of the Japanese fishermen died in Tokyo of radiation sickness six months after the explosion. The fate of the other Japanese is unknown here, and remarkably, the Energy Research and Development Administration, which

has been conducting periodic tests of the Marshallese radiation victims, has not checked up on the 28 American victims since initial tests made in 1954.

Meanwhile, the former residents of Bikini, who were told by U.S. officials at the time of the test that they could return to their island within a year or two, now are suing the U.S. for a \$1.5 million aerial radiological survey to determine if the island is safe for resettlement.

The Energy Research and Development Administration, which used to be known as the Atomic Energy Commission, says that Bikini "is safe to live on" except for the mud in the surrounding waters which is still "quite radioactive and highly dangerous."

The food chain, however, is "not seriously affected" in Bikini, according to the Energy Research and Development Administration. On other islands, the administration has warned people not to eat coconuts, crabs, breadfruit and other staples of the Pacific island diet.

"My clients don't trust the official U.S. scientists who tell them it's safe to go home."

See BOMB, A2, Col. 6

(11/11/76)

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Baltimore/MD /Sun/5-28-76

22 years after Bikini nuclear blast

Islanders getting radiation care

BOMB, from A1

said George M. Allen. "They feel that they've been the guinea pigs too long already."

Some professionals within the Atomic Energy Administration say that the Marshallese are being used primarily as guinea pigs. "The basic thrust of what the United States has done for the radiation victims has been research for our information rather than their welfare," one administration official said.

For example, when an energy administration doctor, in the course of his check-ups, discovered widespread cases of diabetes, apparently unrelated to the bomb blast, he was told that the Energy Research and Development Administration's \$450,000 annual Marshall Islands budget could not be used for treating this disease.

Those, like Mrs. Boas, who were exposed to radiation from the Bikini blast, received \$10,000 as compensation from the U.S. The former residents of Bikini recently were granted \$1 million in compensation for their hardships.

Mrs. Boas says that, since she had five children on the island at the time, she and her husband received a total of \$270,000. She said they spent the money on sending her children to schools as far away as Hawaii, and "in restaurants." A Peace Corps volunteer who lives on Rongelap now said "None of the people have any money left."

Although America's biggest atomic test was conducted in Bikini, many more tests were conducted until the 1958 atomic test ban treaty on Eniwetok Atoll, about 300 miles northwest of here. That atoll was purchased from its residents who were resettled on Ujae Atoll about 150 miles away.

One of the Eniwetok islands was "completely blown

off the face of the earth," according to a U.S. official, and the island chain is still "very hot."

Eniwetok's former residents have asked to return to their island, and the Defense Department, which administers the island, has asked for funds to clear the debris and begin "rehabilitation."

So far, however, Congress has failed to appropriate the requested money, according to a U.S. official here.

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