

Bikinians are nuclear nomads because of a U.S. bungle

By Jonathan M. Weisgall
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Thirty years ago the United States detonated the Bravo hydrogen bomb test at tiny Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

Bravo, with an explosive force equal to nearly 1,000 Hiroshima-type atomic bombs, was the largest man-made explosion in the history of the world, more than twice what its designers expected. It vaporized the entire test island and parts of two others, and sucked them 20 miles into the air.

Moreover, what was described falsely as an "unpredicted" shift in wind sent the fallout eastward over Bikini Island and 240 miles beyond, sprinkling the 236 inhabitants of Rongelap and Utirik with radioac-

tive particles. Fallout also showered a Japanese fishing boat that was 80 miles from the point of detonation. The 23 crew members suffered severe radiation sickness, and one died seven months later.

Under a 1947 trusteeship agreement with the United Nations, the United States agreed to "protect the health" of the islands' inhabitants and to "protect (them) against the loss of their lands and resources." But recent disclosures raise serious questions about U.S. treatment of the Marshallese and their lands:

— Twelve days after the March 1 explosion the Atomic Energy Commission announced that although the islanders were "unexpectedly exposed to some radioactivity ... all were reported well." Four months later the commission reported that

"there is no reason to expect any permanent after effects on the general health of these people." In fact, 90 percent of the Rongelapese suffered skin lesions and loss of hair; many later developed thyroid tumors or other radiation-related illnesses, and there has been one leukemia death.

— The "unpredicted" wind shift occurred six hours before the blast. According to a recently released report by the U.S. Defense Nuclear Agency, the weather review showed winds "headed for Rongelap and to the east," and "it was recognized that (two of Bikini's islands) would be contaminated." In other words, the United States deliberately detonated Bravo knowing that it would contaminate land — and people.

The Marshallese submitted a moving petition to the U.N. Trusteeship

Council in April 1954 "regarding the explosion of lethal weapons within our home islands." Marshallese leaders noted that the people of Rongelap and Utirik were suffering from lowered blood counts, burns, nausea and loss of hair.

The explosion set off enormous public debate here and abroad on nuclear testing and fallout. Americans did not understand the magnitude of this new "H-bomb" until President Dwight D. Eisenhower told a news conference in late March that U.S. scientists were "surprised and astonished" at the results of the Bravo test.

At a March 31 press conference, Lewis L. Strauss, Atomic Energy Commission chairman, casually mentioned that the hydrogen bomb could destroy a city the size of New

York. By April the White House was receiving more than 100 letters and telegrams each day calling for a stop to all atomic testing.

Eisenhower privately ordered a test-ban study, and four years later the United States did impose a moratorium on atmospheric nuclear testing. Then in 1963 the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to ban all atmospheric nuclear tests.

Sadly, however, due to the Bravo test and 22 others conducted on their islands, the people of Bikini have become nuclear nomads more than 38 years after we "temporarily" evacuated them. An inquiry ordered by Congress and conducted by a panel of leading scientists has tentatively concluded that Bikini can be cleaned up — at a cost of up to \$120 million. The administration opposes such an

effort, but without it the Bikinians would have to wait about 100 years before radiation is at a safe level.

Meanwhile, the U.S. and Marshall Islands governments have negotiated a new political relationship that will provide some compensation to the islanders, but that also would terminate all claims in any way related to the U.S. nuclear-testing program in the Pacific.

The United States wants to write a check and close the books on its nuclear legacy in the Pacific, leaving a thousand Bikinians hundreds of miles — and 100 years — away from the home that they left to make room for Bravo.

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