

July 25, 1968

408361

Memorandum

To: The President

From: Secretary of the Interior

Subject: Return of the Bikini People

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US DOE ARCHIVES 326 U.S. ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION
RG _____
Collection 68-70 Secretary
Box 7702
Folder MHAS 3 Radiation v. 1

In 1946 the United States removed the people of Bikini from their atoll in order to permit it to be used for atomic testing. These people, originally about 150, were ultimately settled on Kili island in the southern Marshalls. They have never adjusted to Kili, which is small and has no lagoon, but have retained an intense desire to return to Bikini.

In early 1967, at my request and that of Trust Territory High Commissioner Norwood, the Atomic Energy Commission made a special survey of the atoll in order to determine whether radiation levels were such as to enable people safely to live on its islands. Following this intensive survey of the atoll and a review by a special committee of consultants, an affirmative conclusion was reached. Attached is a copy of the special committee's report which states that ". . . Bikini Atoll, site of more than 20 nuclear tests between 1946 and 1958, is once again safe for human habitation."

At my request, the Secretary of Defense has pushed ahead with a special study of security requirements in that part of the Pacific and has advised me that return of the people to Bikini is compatible with those requirements. The Defense Department may wish to install some unmanned devices, such as radar towers, and on a limited scale station personnel on the atoll, but these activities will not prevent resettlement by the Bikinians nor be inconsistent with the re-establishment of their normal life on the atoll.

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The 1967 AEC survey team undertook an intensive study of the atoll measuring external radiation levels and the radioactivity content of soil, water and plants and of animal life. The last previous survey had been made in 1964 as a part of continuing studies of the atoll since 1946.

The survey team noted that vegetation on the islands of the atoll is dense and that the populations of birds and the marine life of the lagoon were large. However, the coconut trees which are the basis of human life and the economy of coral atolls had been destroyed during the tests. The density of the new vegetation has largely checked their recovery.

The results of the survey have been analyzed by a special committee of consultants. The consultants concluded that:

"The exposures to radiation that would result from repatriation of the Bikini people do not offer a significant threat to their health and safety."

Although the consultants have judged the radiation levels on the atoll now to be acceptable, they made several recommendations for reducing exposure even further. These recommendations include:

- (1) Restrict living areas to the major islands of Eneu (Enyu) and Bikini for the present and cover the village area with a layer of coral rock to reduce further the low level of radiation from the soil;
- (2) Clean out the present population of strontium 90-bearing coconut crabs, which form a part of the diet of Pacific Islanders;
- (3) Remove the radioactive scrap metal which still remains on some of the islands near the test sites; and

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(4) Maintain a continual monitoring of the islands and the population to assure that they do not, in some unforeseen way, accumulate a greater radiation dose than predicted.

The committee of consultants also recommended that resettlement be initiated on Eneu island because of its very low contamination level. "No radiological precautions will be needed on Eneu," the committee reported.

We would propose to follow the recommendations of the consultants in developing a resettlement program. A copy of their report is attached for your information.

Return of the Bikini people cannot be immediate although we should take immediate steps to begin their return. A comprehensive plan must be developed; any remaining sources of major contamination removed; the overgrowth of uneconomic vegetation cleared; the land planted to productive crops; and new housing and community facilities built. We propose to do this with the active participation of the Bikini people in both the planning and execution stages. It will, however, also require the active cooperation of the Department of Defense, the Atomic Energy Commission and, in seeking funds for the resettlement project, the Bureau of the Budget.

Our tentative time table calls for the High Commissioner within the next few weeks to ask the Bikini people to name a group of their leaders to work in the planning stage. The second step is an on-island survey of the atoll to select those sites required by the Defense Department and to plan the location of the new village. At this stage, it is expected that the preliminary resettlement plan will be drafted with the Bikini leadership participating. The visit to Bikini should take place in the last half of August or in early September. During the fall the plan would be completed and cost estimates presented.

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Depending upon the availability of funds, the initial contingent of returnees might be settled within a year. In the meantime, Bikini workers would be engaged in clearing, planting, and building activities. Return of all of the Bikinians now living on Kili might be accomplished within two years. However, resettlement assistance will be required for a much longer period. The atoll is now virtually devoid of edible or economic plants and a feeding program will be required until subsistence foodcrops reach adequate levels and commercial crops come into production. It takes approximately seven years for newly planted coconuts to become fully productive. The coconut is essential to life on a coral atoll, providing food, drink, building materials, and, equally important, virtually the sole source of cash.

There is attached a draft announcement regarding the proposed resettlement of the Bikini people. Bikini and the desire of the people on Kili to return has recently been in the news and there continues to be widespread interest in these people. For these reasons, I request and urge your public announcement of the decision that the Bikini people can and will be relocated on their home atoll of Bikini.

Secretary of the Interior

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~~CONFIDENTIAL - EYES ONLY~~

Draft Announcement
(Second Version)

The President announced today that plans are underway to return the people of Bikini to their home atoll in the Marshall Islands. A special committee of expert consultants has reported to the Atomic Energy Commission that Bikini Atoll, site of more than 20 nuclear tests between 1946 and 1958, is once again safe for human habitation.

The Defense Department has reported after a special study that the return of the people is consistent with security requirements. There will be a continuing requirement for the use of some sites on the atoll and there may be a need for Defense Department personnel to be stationed on the islands from time to time. These uses will not prevent the return of the people nor the re-establishment of their normal way of life.

Bikini Atoll is a ring of 26 coral islands, 25 miles long and 15 miles wide, on the northwestern fringe of the Marshall Islands. Before 1946, when the Bikinians were moved to make way for nuclear tests, about 150 persons lived on the atoll. They moved first to Rongerik Atoll and since 1948 have lived on Kili in the southern Marshall Islands. The Kili population is now about 300 and a total of about 500 people regard Bikini as their traditional home.

Because of the dense overgrowth of the islands and the lack of any substantial quantity of foodstuffs growing on the atoll, an extensive clearing and replanting program will be required. In addition, housing and community facilities, such as a school, dispensary, and a water collection system, will be needed before the Bikinians can return from Kili.

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The Bikini people will actively participate in both the planning and the execution stages of the resettlement program. The High Commissioner of the Trust Territory has been asked to request the Bikini people to name a group of their leaders to work with Trust Territory Government personnel and representatives of the United States Government in developing a comprehensive resettlement plan. This work is scheduled to begin with a visit to the atoll within the next few weeks by a team composed of Bikini representatives, and personnel from the Trust Territory Government, the Defense and Interior Departments and the Atomic Energy Commission. It is the intent of the United States and the Trust Territory Government to work with the Bikini people in building a modern and model community on their atoll.