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REPORT OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
DELEGATION TO THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

May 20 to June 4, 1983

Team Members

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I. INTRODUCTION

Continuing concern expressed by the Pacific churches, through the Pacific Conference of Churches, plus requests from the Marshall Islands caused the WCC to consider sending this small delegation. A final decision was made in consultation with leaders of the United Church of Christ in The Marshalls and the Roman Catholic Church there. The team was hosted and its basic local itinerary suggested by a local ecumenical planning committee comprised of leaders from the United Church and the Catholic Church.

The purposes of the visit were: (i) to assess the residual radiation problem as an environmental and health hazard; (ii) to study the social and human cost of the US military presence; (iii) to consult with the churches of the Marshalls regarding these questions; and (iv) to explore with the churches, in the context of the WCC's standing concerns for peace and disarmament, long-term strategies for mobilizing the commitment of the churches around the world on these issues.

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It should be noted that while the team included an expert on radiation effects, it did not presume to take up a highly technical role. This was essentially a church visitation team sent as an expression of church concern, willing to listen to all persons and groups having significant messages about that situation. We saw our role to be interpretive, reflective, consultative and directed towards a clearer, more helpful response on the part of the churches.

Among the categories of people we encountered were: people displaced from their land, groups that experienced high levels of radioactive fallout, people living in "temporary" homes or are affected because their land is continually used for US presence and missile testing, officials of the Marshall Islands Governments and other political leaders, church leaders, a lawyer, medical doctors, missionaries, an anthropologist, US officials and civilian employees at Kwajalein and American scientists from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories.

II. RADIATION AND RELATION QUESTIONS

In the 37 years since the atom bomb was first "dropped" on the Marshalls at Bikini, the lives of not only the exiles from their homeland (Bikini and Enewetok), or the groups irradiated, but the lives of all Marshallese have been radically altered. The effects of radiation pervade their existence far beyond the readily observable and reported health and environmental effects associated with the extensive US nuclear weapons testing program in the Marshalls. Today, in the broad sense, "radiation" is a basic, pervading reality for all Marshallese people.

Indeed, a new culture, vocabulary and mythology have developed around the radiation question. Whenever there is a physical debility, a birth anomaly or other abnormality, the people tend to believe that such had not occurred before "The Bomb". Cases of fish poisoning, unusual plant disease, the demise of the highly valued arrowroot plant (a traditional staple), seem invariably to be attributed to radiation, even though this is contrary to scientific evidence. Myth or reality, these anxieties and fears are painfully real, and they are a consequence of the testing program.

The radiation question is a difficult one, even for scientists who have been working with it for many years. Many dedicated US scientists have been involved in an extensive effort over many years to assess and treat the effects of radiation exposure of Marshallese and to monitor the residual radioactivity contaminating many of the islands in the northern atolls. It would appear that they have performed with honesty, and in most cases -- particularly in recent years -- with a reasonable level of competence. Nevertheless, it is always possible to identify areas where more attention should have been focused. Two such areas which have become critically important are (i) the education of the Marshallese on the nature of radiation and its human and environmental effect and (ii) providing adequate medical care and compensation for victims of the atomic bomb test. Related to the first area the recent US Department of Energy (DOE) books on the radioactive contamination of Enewetok, Bikini and the northern atolls have been almost totally ineffective, and in some

instances, counterproductive in explaining the nature of radiation and the effects of the residual radioactive contamination on human health. These books have been ineffective even though written in Marshallese and English and clearly aimed at a lay audience. Most Marshallese simply cannot understand the text. Moreover, the presentation of the results in terms of the average risk of dying of cancer -- perhaps presented this way in an effort to simplify the issue -- tends to mask the variability of the data and its uncertainties, making the results misleading.

With regard to the second area, the US medical surveillance program conducted by Brookhaven National Laboratory under DOE contract is a narrowly focused research effort to identify the late effects of radiation in the most heavily exposed Marshallese people. The treatment by the US of radiation induced health effects and compensation for these effects have been largely but not totally limited to those effects which have been clearly identified by the surveillance program as being radiation induced, mainly, thyroid abnormalities among those most heavily exposed to the fallout from the Bravo test. Health effects that have not been statistically linked to radiation in the Marshallese population under study are generally not treated -- exceptions have been made but generally these have not been in accord with Brookhaven's contract with DOE -- and the victims are not compensated. In effect, the burden of proof lies not with the US to demonstrate the disease is not radiation induced, but with the victim to demonstrate that it was.

The US Government -- and perhaps the United Nations -- should consider whether the medical surveillance program should be so narrowly defined; whether the people in the surveillance program who have been categorized as "unexposed controls" should be so categorized; and whether the level of compensation and the people who qualify for it are appropriately defined.

Nearly everyone with whom we spoke felt that the Marshall Islands has serious, unique health problems and inadequate care (the lack of health care facilities is obvious even to the casual observer); that all of the people should be given comprehensive health care regardless of whether they have been categorized as "exposed" or "unexposed"; that the new Marshall Islands Government does not have adequate capacity to do this; and that it is the responsibility of the US government not just to give funding, but to ensure by all reasonable means that such care is made available. Moreover, a Marshalls government-endorsed independent medical survey might be helpful in moving more decisively in this direction.

There is widespread distrust by Marshallese of US scientists involved in radiation monitoring and health surveillance programs. Among the Marshallese who are participants in the Brookhaven surveillance program some have even said, "the Marshallese are being used as 'guinea pigs'", "and that the fallout from the 1954 Bravo test was not an accident." Unfortunately the scientists working today are forced to carry ~~the~~ the baggage of mistakes and changes in policy accumulated over the past 37 years. We heard ulterior motives attributed to the DOE's educational efforts regarding residual radiation. Some charge that scientists are giving conflicting messages.

These are strong, perhaps even paranoid statements. *But* though they may be difficult to accept they must be seen for their significance in the cynicism and frustration which they reflect.

The problem of the primary contaminated atolls, Bikini and Enewetok, is deeply troubling. A serious cleanup attempt is being made at Enewetok, at a reported expenditure of \$218 million. In the light of the drastic measures and unusual lifestyle required for resettlement, it is not yet clear if many of the people will choose to return. Bikini poses a more difficult case than Enewetok, and thus far the US Government has taken the position that cleanup would be too expensive. It would seem that a profound moral and legal question is posed here for the global community. Who is to decide upon such weighty matters of land abuse and restoration? While even a very imperfect cleanup at Bikini could cost several hundred million dollars, some Marshallese pointed out that the US Government is spending much more than that amount on just a few weapons such as the MX missiles, now being tested at Kwajalein. At one meeting an articulate young man asked, "Why can the US do whatever it chooses?"

III. US SECURITY NEEDS AND KWAJALEIN ATOLL

At a most basic level, this situation must be seen as one of the many tragic effects of the arms race. It was the US perception of its own security needs which was the driving force behind the testing program and now the way in which the new political arrangements are evolving. While the US would clearly like to resolve and be free from the ubiquitous problems and unfortunate colonial image associated with the Pacific Island Trust Territory, its current military requirements are having major impact upon the political, economic and social status of the new nation.

It is at the Kwajalein Atoll where we see the embodiment of this question. The Kwajalein people, most of them now living in crowded dismal conditions on 27 Ha. (67 acres) Ebeye Island, are seeking, thus far unsuccessfully, to attain a measure of restoration to their land, which is being used as part of the missile testing range. The determination of the Kwajalein people, working through an organization known as The Kwajalein Atoll Corporation, is a remarkable story in itself. The Kwajalein people will without doubt play a key role in this continuing debate.

IV. "THE LAWYERS"

Lawyers and the litigation to pursue health damage and land claims have become a significant, often troubling political factor. This, too, is a consequence of the weapons testing program. Are the people being exploited in new ways through the lawyers, even as they deal with older injustices? Is there an unfortunate "pull" towards money solutions, or compensation, rather than long-term restoration of the basic relationships between the people and their land and culture? Perhaps, but the lawyers apparently have brought these greatly disadvantaged people a new means of much-needed power, and it would be most unwise to jeopardize this by attacking their sensitive lawyer-client relationship.

V. THE CHURCH IN THE MARSHALLS

The Church in the Marshall Islands has played and will apparently continue to play a nurturing and comforting role rather than one of advocacy.

In this fragmented society the church is a relatively strong, self-reliant indigenous institution where people can come together in spite of their division. In communities where virtually all persons belong to the church, and where virtually all members of the local government councils are church people, it is the custom to speak on political and economic matters through civic channels.

While we have regretted that a clear, official church statement has not come forward from the Marshalls on these concerns, many church people have spoken out, and we must trust the churches of the Marshalls to find their own appropriate official way of response.

We were at all times made to feel that the concern represented by the visit was much needed and deeply appreciated. The Marshallese people want the world to know what has happened to them. They want the whole Church to pray for them and to speak out on their behalf: for their health and welfare; their long-term security; their independence and integrity as a people.

VI. CRITICAL ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED BY THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

1. While this report is openly critical of US policy and practice in the Marshall Islands, we must point out that this situation is in a deep sense just a part of the wider problem of the global arms race. The alleviation of the difficulties of the Marshallese people will depend largely upon reducing the need for continued strategic weapons tests. Our response as a global church must be seen in relation to the biblical mandate for peacemaking.
2. Ordinary people in the Marshall Islands consistently told us that the regional and world church must continue to make people more aware of what is happening there. The churches should continue to play a responsible role in strengthening the accountability of the United States and the United Nations for what is happening in the Pacific Island Trust Territory. We should continue to seek guidance from the churches of the Marshalls in fulfilling this role.
3. Long-term questions of political status are especially critical at this moment in history. Unresolved health, land and economic problems will tend to influence long-term political decisions. It is important that there be a maximum of open public discussion on the proposed new political status. The churches, both within and outside of the Marshalls, should seek to play a constructive role in this process, particularly in raising value questions.

4. In light of serious, unique health problems, a much higher level of health care is needed for the Marshall Islands, for the whole population, and on a continuing basis. Consultation is needed to determine potentially effective ways for promoting this.
5. Profound moral and legal questions are raised in the matter of the radiation-contaminated atolls. Who shall decide and upon what basis shall they or shall they not be "cleaned". It would seem appropriate for the churches to project such questions, even if final action would seem totally dependent upon US willingness to respond.
6. The Marshallese people will be living with the reality of ionizing radiation for a long time to come. Efforts at educating them about it are extremely important. Thus far, however, such efforts have not been effective. It appears that the level of trust for the US Department of Energy is so low that this educational task should be taken up by some other, more trusted group.
7. A related, but slightly different point than 6: We found that a serious lack of technical information exists in the Marshalls about the radiation problem. It would seem important that the US Government make an unreserved effort to supply and the Government of the Marshalls to serve as custodian for a basic library and file of technical reports and papers accessible to interested persons and groups.
8. In no way would we jeopardize the effectiveness of the lawyers seeking to bring a greater measure of justice to the Marshallese groups engaged in litigation against the US Government for health, environmental and other claims. At the same time, it might be helpful for the Government of the Marshalls to establish guidelines for the lawyers, in the interest of the Marshallese groups, including guidelines for lawyer's fees.
9. Since the sit-in demonstration last year at Kwajalein (called "Operation Homecoming" by the Marshallese), the Kwajalein Missile Range Base officials have taken an unnecessarily harsh line against the Marshallese community at Ebeye. We would hope that even though many of the basic, long-term questions have not been resolved, the people, as the rightful owners of Kwajalein, will be treated with dignity and respect, that Base officials will give serious consideration to their complaints, and neither limit nor withhold essential services.

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P.S. A more detailed version along with a complete itinerary and some historical notes may be obtained from the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches (150, route de Ferney, Geneva, Switzerland), which organized the visit.