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June 22, 1979

Dr. Berbert Vetter
International Atomic Energy Agency
Karlerring 11
A-1011 Vienna
Austria

Dear Dr. Vetter:

I am counsel for the people of Bikini, who were moved off their atoll in 1946 so that the United States could conduct nuclear weapons tests. I am writing to seek your assistance in reviewing the methodology, results and conclusions of recent radiological and medical studies at Bikini.

From 1946 to 1958, the United States detonated 23 nuclear devices at Bikini, including the March 1, 1954 hydrogen bomb test "Bravo." In 1967, nine years after President Eisenhower declared a moratorium on atmospheric nuclear testing, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) conducted a radiological survey of Bikini to measure its safety. An Ad Hoc Committee appointed by the AEC reviewed the results of the survey and declared that Bikini was "once again safe for human habitation." The report concluded:

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

Accordingly, on August 12, 1968, President Johnson announced that radiation levels on Bikini Atoll were low enough to allow safe resettlement.

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Cleanup and rehabilitation of Bikini began in 1969 in preparation for resettlement, and the AEC continued to monitor Bikini's safety. One AEC official stated in 1969 that "there is virtually no radiation left, and we can find no discernable effect on either plant or animal life." In 1971, the Director of AEC's Division of Operational Safety reported that well water samples had been taken from several locations on Bikini Island over a period of time and that, "from a radiological viewpoint, the water is safe to drink."

Despite these assurances, the Bikinians expressed increasing concern over the atoll's safety, and in 1975 they brought a court action to seek an order directing the United States to conduct a thorough radiological survey of the atoll to measure and assess its safety. In the court complaint, the Bikinians openly conceded their ignorance as to Bikini's safety:

"For us to make an intelligent decision to resettle Bikini Atoll, we must be able to weigh our desire and return against the radiological risks of returning. We have not been provided with that information in a form that we can understand."

After several years of litigation and settlement discussions, the United States agreed to conduct a thorough radiological study, including aerial radiation surveys and terrestrial and marine studies, of Bikini and thirteen other islands and atolls in the northern Marshall Islands that received fallout from one or more of the U.S. nuclear tests in the Pacific.

The survey was conducted in late 1978, and some of the results from the aerial surveys have been released. Before the survey was even conducted, however, medical examinations conducted in April, 1978 on the 145 people who had been moved back to Bikini in the early 1970's showed body burdens so high that it was necessary to move them off Bikini Island.

Based on these medical examinations and preliminary results from the radiological survey, the United States has announced that Bikini Island will be off limits for habitation or agricultural use for approximately 60 years and that Eniwetok Island in Bikini Atoll will be off limits for at least 20-25 years.

The Bikinians, who are confused by the conflicting information they have received over the years, do not understand why earlier surveys of Bikini were erroneous. They

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have, understandably, lost all trust in U.S. Government scientists.

I expressed these views on behalf of the people of Bikini last month in remarks to the United Nations Trusteeship Council (see attachment at pages 10-11), and I requested that an international committee of scientists, having no connection with or interest in the U.S. government or the U.S. nuclear testing program, independently review and assess the results and conclusions of the northern Marshall Islands radiological survey, specifically as they apply to the safety of Bikini and Eniw Islands in Bikini Atoll. Last week, I made the same request to the U.S. government, suggesting that the United States fund an independent assessment of the survey by a committee of international scientists or perhaps fund several independent assessments by individual non-United States scientists.

Given the importance of this survey to the future of the Bikinians, the past mistakes of U.S. scientists in measuring and/or assessing the safety of Bikini, and the uncertainties concerning the long-term effect of low levels of radiation, I believe that it is in the interests of all parties to seek independent assessment of the survey. Although I have not yet received a formal reply from the United States government, I am hopeful that it will respond favorably to the Bikinians' request.

In the event that the United States does agree to fund an independent review of the northern Marshall Islands radiological survey, would you be interested in participating in this review? Some of the broad questions the Bikinians seek to have answered are the following:

-- Was the proper methodology used in the northern Marshalls survey?

-- Did the survey employ the best available technological techniques and equipment?

-- Are the data collected from the survey accurate and reliable?

-- Are the conclusions, predictions and risk assessments concerning the future safety of Bikini and Eniw Islands valid? An analysis of this issue would, of course, necessitate a review of both the survey and the April, 1978 medical examinations.

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Dr. Berbert Vetter
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If you would be interested in participating in this project, please let me know at your earliest convenience. If you wish, I will send you detailed information concerning the survey and the medical examinations.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jonathan M. Weisgall

Jonathan M. Weisgall

Attachment

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