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For the Good of Mankind¹

Darlene Keju-Johnson²

In 1946, a U.S. Navy officer came to Bikini Island and told Chief Juda, “We are testing these bombs for the good of mankind, and to end all wars.” Very few of us Marshallese spoke English or even understood it. There was one word that stuck in the chief’s mind, “mankind.” He knew that word because it is in the Bible. So he said, “If it is in the name of God, I am willing to let my people go.” The naval officer did not tell the chief that the Bikinians would never see their home again. Bikini is off-limits for another 30,000 years. It will never be safe for people ever again.

When that naval officer came, there were already thousands of soldiers and scientists on the atoll, and hundreds of airplanes and ships in the lagoon. They were ready to conduct the tests. The United States promised the Bikinians that it only wanted their islands for a short time. The chief thought maybe a short time meant next week, or maybe next month. So, they moved to Rongerik. The Bikinians had no choice but to leave their islands, and they have never returned.

Rongerik is a sandbar island. There are no resources on it. It was too poor to feed the people. We live on our oceans—it’s like our supermarket—and from our land we get breadfruit and other foods. But on Rongerik, there was nothing. The United States put the Bikinians on this island and left them there. After a year, they sent a military medical official to see how they were. When he got there, he found them starving. Imagine using your power to move a group of people from their home, dumping them on a little sand, and not even bothering to go back and see how they are doing for one year. The people of Bikini have been moved, or “relocated,” three times. The people of Enewetak Atoll were also relocated.

You cannot imagine the psychological problems that people have gone through due to relocation.

In 1954, the United States exploded the world's first hydrogen bomb, code named "Bravo," on Bikini. It was 1,000 times stronger than the Hiroshima bomb. We were never warned that this blast was about to take place on our islands. Fallout covered our islands. The people of Rongelap and Utirik, who were most directly affected, were not picked up until three days after the explosion. It was horrible. Some American soldiers came and said, "Get ready. Jump in the ocean and get on the boat because we are leaving. Don't bring any belongings. Just go in the water." There was no boat to get the people to the ship, not even the children and the old people. People had to swim with their children. It was very rough. When they got to the ship, each family was given one blanket. Some families had ten or twelve children, but they had to share one blanket.

They were taken to Kwajalein. It took one night to get there. They didn't give people a change of clothing; they had to sleep in their contaminated clothing all the way. They were burnt, and they were vomiting. When they got to Kwajalein, they were given soap and were told to wash in the lagoon. The soap and the salt water were supposed to wash off the radiation. They were not told what had happened, why it had happened, or what was wrong with them. Their hair was falling out, fingernails were falling off—but they were never told why. The people of Rongelap and Utirik were on Kwajalein for three months before they were moved again. The people of Utirik went back to their contaminated island. The people of Rongelap didn't return to Rongelap for three years—it was too contaminated.

Twenty-eight American men who were on Rongerik monitoring the tests and the crew of a nearby Japanese fishing boat were also contaminated. We are in touch with one of these men who was studying the tests. He told us that the U.S. government knew the wind was blowing toward islands where people lived, but that it went ahead and tested anyway. It was not a

mistake. It is interesting that the U.S. government moved the Marshallese in the 1940s when it was testing the small bombs, but when they tested the biggest bomb ever, the Marshallese were not even warned. This is why we believe we have been used as guinea pigs.

Since the testing, there has been a tremendous increase in health problems. The biggest problem we have now, especially among women and children, is cancer. Women have breast cancer and cancer in their private places. Children are deformed. I saw a child from Rongelap whose feet are clubbed. And there was another child whose hands are like nothing at all, and who is mentally retarded. Some of these children suffer growth retardation. I have interviewed hundreds of Marshallese women in the northern islands, and this is their story I am telling you. The health problems are increasing. They have not stopped.

Now we have this problem we call “jellyfish babies.” These babies are born like jellyfish. They have no eyes. They have no heads. They have no arms. They have no legs. They are not shaped like human beings at all. But they are being born on the labour table, the most colourful, ugly things that you have ever seen. Some of them have hairs on them, and they breathe. When they die, they are buried right away. A lot of times they do not allow the mother to see this kind of baby because she will go crazy. It is too inhumane. Many women today are frightened of having these jellyfish babies. I have had two tumours taken out of me recently, and I fear that if I have children, they will be jellyfish babies also. These babies are being born not only on the [U.S. declared] radioactive islands, but also throughout the thirty-five atolls and five islands of the Marshalls.

It is not just the people who have been affected, but also our environment. For example, we have breadfruit—it is like a potato. Instead of green and healthy looking, it is mutated. It is deformed, just like our infants. A lot of these foods are no longer edible.

Enewetak Atoll, west of Bikini, was also used for testing. The United States tested twenty-three bombs on Bikini and forty-three on Enewetak. In

Enewetak Atoll there is one little island called Runit. It is off-limits forever. After the testing, the United States tried to clean up the radiation from Enewetak. It collected all the nuclear debris from the southern islands (the northern islands were too contaminated) and dumped it into a bomb crater on Runit, then covered it up with concrete. It is a huge dome. Now the scientists are saying that it is leaking, but they say it doesn't matter because the lagoon is already radioactive. There are people living only about three or four miles from there.

Then there are the northern islands, only ten miles away. They are off-limits, too. But people used to go there for food. Now they are told not to eat those coconuts and crabs, but U.S. ships bringing food are often delayed and irregular. And they do not bring much food. The people have no choice but to eat from the off-limits islands.

The U.S. government has never conducted an epidemiological survey. The Department of Energy (DOE) sends its medical team, but it will only go to Rongelap and Utirik, the two islands the United States recognises as affected by the fallout from the 1954 bomb. But there are many others.

If you are found to have a cancerous thyroid, you are sent to the U.S. mainland or to Guam to get it removed. They don't explain to you exactly what they are doing to your throat. They just tell you to go. There is no translator. Only the DOE representatives meet you, but they don't speak Marshallese. You are told not to make any phone calls to any relatives or friends. You are told to speak only to the DOE representatives. There are no medical records kept. An individual has a right to know what is happening to her, a right to question what exactly is going on in her body. That right has not been given to us. You just go, get rid of your thyroid, and then you go back home. A lot of Marshallese are fed up with the DOE and the U.S. government.

The Rongelap people said, "We have had enough! You are not going to treat us like animals, like nothing at all! We are moving." The whole island, 350 people, moved to live on Mejato, which is a small island in

Kwajalein Atoll. Kwajalein landowners gave them that island, but the United States would not help. Instead, the U.S. government campaigned to discredit the Rongelapese. By relocating themselves, the Rongelap people said they did not want to be part of this whole nuclear craziness. Their bottom line is: "We care about our children's future." In the Marshalls, leaving your island is not easy, but they decided that their children come first. They know that they are contaminated. They know they will be dying out soon. They are dying now, slowly.

As if it wasn't enough to live under this reality, the United States decided to use Kwajalein Atoll for missile testing. Once again, our people were relocated by force. U.S. missile testing took two-thirds of Kwajalein's lagoon, which is the largest in the world, and shoved the people off the many islands onto tiny Ebeye. Ebeye is only sixty-six acres. Today there are more than 10,000 people living on that island.

There are many problems on Ebeye. For example, when there is a test being conducted, the Marshallese are not allowed to go out fishing. The people on Ebeye have to survive on canned foods, rice, and bread. We cannot eat our traditional food, so we have a problem with malnutrition. Children are not healthy because their diet is very poor. That is why in 1982, the people of Kwajalein decided to take direct action. They sailed in to take over eleven off-limits islands and lived there for four months. A thousand people said to the United States, "You are not going to treat us like second-class citizens in our own islands!" They shut the base down and stopped the missile testing for a while. The sail-in was repeated in 1986.

We are only a very few thousand people out there on tiny islands, but we are doing our part to stop this nuclear madness. And although we are few, we have done it! Which means that you can do it too! But we need your support. We must come together to save this world for our children and for the future generations to come.

¹ This narrative was originally published in *PACIFIC WOMEN SPEAK OUT FOR INDEPENDENCE AND DENUCLEARISATION 15-20* (Zohl de Ishtar ed., Raven Press, Christchurch 1999), Joint project of Women's International League for Peace (Aotearoa), Freedom and Disarmament and Security Centre (New Zealand), and Pacific Connections (Australia).

² Darlene Keju-Johnson was a resident of the Marshall Islands and the Director of the Marshall Islands' Ministry of Health's Division of Adolescent Health until her death from breast cancer in 1996.