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Learning from Rongelap's Pain[1]

Lijon Eknilang[2]

I was born on Rongelap, and I lived there at the time of the nuclear weapons testing programme. I was eight years old in 1954, at the time of the "Bravo" shot on Bikini. It was my birthday, March 1. I remember that it was very early in the morning, that I woke up with a bright light in my eyes. I ran outside to see what had happened. I thought someone was burning the house. There was a huge, brilliant light that consumed the sky. We all ran outside of our homes to see it. Soon after, we heard a big, loud noise—just like thunder—and the earth started to move. The ground started to sway and sink. The loud noise hurt our ears. We were very afraid because we didn't know what it was. The elders said another world war had begun. I remember crying.

A little later in the morning, we saw a big cloud moving toward our islands. It covered the sky. Then it began to snow in Rongelap. We had heard about snow from the missionaries and other westerners who had come to our islands, but this was the first time we saw white particles fall from the sky and cover our island. For many hours, poison from the bomb kept falling on our islands. We kids were playing in the powder, having fun, but later everyone was sick and we couldn't do anything. We started to feel itchy in our eyes, like we had sand in them.

Late in the afternoon I became very sick, like I was going to vomit, and I had a bad headache. Other people on the islands experienced the same problems. Toward the evening, our skin began to burn like we had been out in the hot sun all day. The next day, the problems got worse. Big burns began spreading all over our legs, arms, feet, and they hurt very much. Many of us lost our hair. Of course, we did not know that the snow was radioactive. Over the weeks that followed, the fallout that our bodies were

exposed to caused blisters and sores. The serious internal and external exposure we received caused long-term health problems that affected my parents' generation, my generation, and my children's generation.

During the days after Bravo, the fallout was in the air we breathed, in the fresh water we drank, and in the food we ate during the days after Bravo. We wanted to drink water very badly, so we went to the water drums. The water was changing colour, but we drank it anyway. I remember we ate some fish and drank some coconut juice, too.

We remained on Rongelap for two and a half days after the fallout came. Then Americans came to evacuate my people to the American base on Kwajalein Atoll. Some of them tried to explain what was happening, but there was not enough time for us to understand, and we were very sick and couldn't pay attention to anything. We had very high fevers and felt like we wanted to drop. We had very ill people—they could not even pay attention to their own kids. Some of us left by airplane, but most of us left on a large ship. We could not take our belongings or our animals. We did not know, when we left on March 3, 1954, that we would be leaving our homes for almost three years.

We stayed on Kwajalein for three months to receive medical treatment and observation. Then we moved to Majuro Island, and we stayed there for three years because Rongelap was too dangerous to live on. In 1957, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission doctor came to tell us that it was safe for us to return back home. In June 1957, when we did return, we saw changes to our island. Some of our food crops, such as arrowroot, had completely disappeared. Makmok, or tapioca plants, stopped bearing fruit. What we ate gave us blisters on our lips and in our mouths, and we suffered terrible stomach problems and nausea. Some of the fish we caught caused the same problems. These were things that had not happened before 1954. Our staple foods had never made us ill.

We brought these problems to the attention of the doctors and officials who visited us. They said we were preparing the foods incorrectly, or that

we had fish poisoning. We knew what they said was impossible, because we had been preparing and surviving on these foods for centuries without suffering the problems that appeared after 1954. Although our blisters, burns, and hair loss eventually cleared up, we later experienced other, even more serious problems. In the early 1960s, we began to experience the illnesses we are having now—many people suffer from thyroid tumours, stillbirths, eye problems, liver cancers, stomach cancers, and leukæmia.

Even people who were not on Rongelap in 1954, but who went there with us in 1957, began to experience the same illnesses we experienced in later years. Foreign doctors and other officials called those people the "control group," and we were told the sickness of that group proved our illnesses were common to all Marshallese. We did not believe that, and we learned only recently that the "control group" had come from areas that had also been contaminated by radioactivity from the weapons tests.

I will tell you some things about my family. My grandmother lived to 107 years old. She died in the 1960s because of thyroid and stomach cancer. My father, a first captain in the Marshall Islands navy, had already died on June 30, 1954, because he was somewhere around the area where they were testing the bomb. My cousin died of cancer in 1960. In 1972, I had another cousin die of leukæmia. Two of my sisters had thyroid surgery in 1981.

My own health has suffered as a result of radiation poisoning. I cannot have children. I have had seven miscarriages. On one of those occasions, I miscarried after four months. The child I miscarried was severely deformed—it had only one eye. In 1978, I had thyroid surgery to remove nodules. Now I have to take thyroid medication every day for the rest of my life. Doctors recently found more nodules in my thyroid, which will have to be removed in the near future. I have lumps in my breasts, as well as kidney and stomach problems, for which I am receiving treatment. My eyesight is blurred, and everything looks foggy to me.

Women have experienced many reproductive cancers and abnormal births. Marshallese women suffer silently and differently from the men who were exposed to radiation. Our culture and religion teach us that reproductive abnormalities are a sign that women have been unfaithful to their husbands. For this reason, many of my friends keep quiet about the strange births they had. They gave birth in privacy, not to children as we like to think of them, but to things we could only describe as "octopuses," "apples," "turtles," and other things in our experience. We do not have Marshallese words for these kinds of babies, because they were never born before the radiation came.

The most common birth defects on Rongelap and other atolls in the Marshall Islands have been "jellyfish babies." These babies are born without bones in their bodies and with transparent skin. We can see their brains and their hearts beating. They have no legs, no arms, no head, no nothing. Some of these things we carry for eight months, nine months. The babies usually live for a day or two before they stop breathing. Many women die from abnormal pregnancies, and those who survive give birth to what look like strands of purple grapes, which we quickly hide away and bury.

Many of the women who have given birth to these "monster babies" are from atolls that foreign officials told us were not affected by radiation. We know otherwise, because their health problems are similar to ours. One woman on Likiep gave birth to a child with two heads. There is a young girl on Ailuk today with no knees, three toes on each foot, and a missing arm. Her mother had not been born by 1954, but she was raised on a contaminated atoll. Other children are born who will never recognise this world, or even their own parents. They just lie there with crooked arms and legs and never speak. Sometimes I feel that I have a baby inside me. I feel very happy that I will have a baby, but then I am afraid of what kind of baby it is going to be. I live in two separate worlds: one part of me wants to have a baby, but this other part of me is too scared.

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

We began to learn about leukæmia when the body of Lekoj Anjain, a fifteen year-old boy who had been strong and healthy, was returned to Rongelap in a coffin. We did not understand his illness or the illnesses for which we were sent to the United States to be treated. Many of us were sent from our islands for the first time in our lives to hospitals in the United States and Guam. We had surgeries and treatments that we knew little about because we did not speak English and, in most cases, there were no translators. Some of us had brain tumours and other cancers removed. In more recent years, we have come to learn that some of us had our entire thyroids removed. Lekoj Anjain's father, John, began to keep a list of all the Rongelapese who died, and all of those who went to the United States to have their thyroids removed. Because there were so many people involved, we were afraid we would not remember all of them.

We had to ask ourselves: why had this happened? Every year the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) doctors came to Rongelap to examine the people. They would tell us that everything was okay, that we did not have anything to worry about. We told them we did not feel any better, that our bodies felt weak all the time. Many children and seemingly healthy adults died unexpectedly in the years following Bravo. We had to believe that our island was radioactive. Since we returned to Rongelap in 1957, we have worried about living on our contaminated island. In 1978, the DOE doctors did a special study of the Rongelap Atoll and another island in the Marshalls. After the study, they told us that we were not allowed to eat the fish, coconuts, and other food from the northern parts of Rongelap. They told us that it is safe for us to live in the southern parts of the atoll where there is low-level radiation. These studies made the people of Rongelap very scared for the future of their children. Since that time, we have wanted to leave Rongelap.

So, we planned to move from Rongelap. We signed a petition on the island—everyone signed it—to send to the U.S. government asking them to help us. It refused. It said the island was completely safe and that there

was no reason for us to leave. Our own government is very closely tied to the U.S. government, and it would not help us either. So, in 1985, with the help of the Greenpeace ship, Rainbow Warrior, the people on Rongelap evacuated themselves from the atoll to another island in Kwajalein Atoll. We have lived in exile ever since.

There are now 350 people living on tiny Mejato Island. It is only one mile long. There was nothing on the island when we got there. We had to build shelters for the babies, women, and the elderly out of the things we carried from Rongelap. It was very hard to leave our islands behind, especially for the elderly. It was not easy for them to leave their home. Three of them just went inside their huts and never came out until the day they died.

Life on Mejato is not easy. There is not enough food on the island for my people, only a few coconuts and some fish. There is only about one acre that will grow food because there is not enough soil. Mejato is mainly sand and coral. The U.S. government is supposed to give us food, but they never bring enough and most of the time the boat is delayed. We have to get our supplies from Ebeye twice a month. Another small island right next to Kwajalein Island, Ebeye is a U.S. base for the world's largest missile range.

It was not easy to leave Rongelap. We had to give up everything. Many people do not think that our tiny island of Rongelap is very important. But it is our home. We are meant to be there. Our land is everything, our medicine, our food, our houses, and our everyday supplies. Our land is our memory of those people we have lost. Their spirit is in the land. Our land is everything and it has been ruined by the U.S. government. Now we have to plan ahead for our children. I know it is too late for me and the others—our lives have already been ruined—but we are thinking about the future. We do not want our kids to receive the sickness we have.

Since the nuclear weapons tests, the story of the Marshallese people has been sad and painful. Allow our experience now to save others such sadness and pain later. I know firsthand what the devastating effects of

nuclear weapons are over time and over long distances, and what those effects mean to innocent human beings across generations. I plead with you to do what you can, to not allow the suffering we Marshallese have experienced to be repeated in any other community in the world. While no government or other organisation can restore the health of the Marshallese people or our environment, steps can be taken that will make it less likely that the same kinds of horrors will be experienced again.

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[1] This narrative was originally published in PACIFIC WOMEN SPEAK OUT FOR INDEPENDENCE AND DENUCLEARISATION 21-26 (Zohl dé 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).

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