

“For the Good of Mankind”

The Pacific Network in Germany and the Pacific Information Desk would like to remind the people of today that there are people in the world who have already suffered and are still suffering from nuclear weapons. The memory of them is our deep concern.

On 1st July 1946 the nuclear test period in the South Pacific region began with the operation “Crossroads”, which the US government started in Micronesia (Marshall Islands). More than fifty years and 300 tests later the French government conducted the last test at Fangataufa. But the region still suffers from the consequences of these tests. Until today the USA did not fulfil their duty to pay appropriate compensation to the Marshallese people. The French government still refuses to compensate the (indigenous) people of French Polynesia - especially those who worked at the dangerous test sites - for their affected health. The nuclear powers seem to ignore the populations of the affected areas.

„In 1946 a US 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 navy official did not tell the chief that the Bikinians would never see their home again. Bikini is off limits for 30,000 years. It will never be safe for people ever again.” (Darlene Keju-Johnston – Marshall Islands)



Now, over sixty years after the first nuclear test in the Pacific we know that these bombs did not protect the world from wars. On the contrary the nuclear powers started their arms race that caused even more tensions between states. Wars went on, new ones came along and countless people died. So the governments of the nuclear states should have realised that the “silver bullet” did not work. But this did not stop them from building more nuclear arms. Today we have around 26,000 nuclear weapons.

What should the people in the test areas of the South Pacific think about these “developments”? They were told that they would serve the people of the world if they leave their homes but it turned out to be untrue.

At the time the tests began the Marshall Islands were part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands and the United States had amongst others the obligation to:

- promote the economic advancement and self-sufficiency of the Micronesians;
- protect them against the loss of their lands and resources; and
- promote the social advancement of the people.

Quite the contrary happened. The Micronesians lost their homelands, their self-sufficiency, their health and their self-determination.

The island Rongelap is located 130 km away from Bikini. On 1st March the Rongelapese suffered most when the 17.000 kiloton-Bomb "Bravo" detonated at Bikini and the direct fall-out contaminated Rongelap. For the cause of science and military development it was interesting for the nuclear powers to see what happened to the environment and the people. For the inhabitants of Rongelap and other affected areas it was an unjustifiable tragedy.

The loss of land is a very bitter experience and caused the Bikinians and Rongelapese the status of "nuclear nomads". They were brought to islands in the Kwajalein Atoll, where there is not enough space for everybody (Ebeye – 66 acres for more than 10.000 people). There they live under bad conditions without proper nutrition or sufficient water supplies or even suitable housing. They are dependent on food deliveries from outside. Next to them - on two thirds of Kwajalein's lagoon, which is the largest in the world - the USA have installed a military base for missile testing. In 2003 the USA renegotiated the "Compact of Free Association" (CFA) with a pro-American administration in the Marshall Islands. A separate agreement gives the USA continued access to its \$4 billion missile-defence test site on Kwajalein until at least 2066. In return the USA agreed to pay \$15 m a year, rising to \$18 m after 2014. The new compact gives the Marshallese the right to work and live in America. In the first phase of the CFA (1986-2001) the USA paid \$270 m compensation to nuclear victims. However the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, established under the compact, determined that the compensation required for damage to property alone was many times greater than this sum. And the new government in the Marshall Islands, elected in 2008, has repeated the call for adequate compensation for the illnesses, genetic defects, miscarriages and deaths as well as the destruction of the land caused by radioactive contamination. Yet the USA refuses to pay any more.

Even though these islands are small they are still the homes of people! Acknowledging this is only human.

It wasn't easy to leave Rongelap. We had to give up everything. Many people don't think that our tiny island of Rongelap is very important to us. But it is our home. We are meant to be there. Our land is everything, our medicine, our food, our houses, our everyday supply. Our land is our memory of those people we've lost, their spirit is in the land. Our land is everything and it has been ruined by the US government. But we had to plan ahead for our children. I know it is too late for me and the others, our lives have already been ruined, but it's the future we're thinking about. We don't want our kids to receive all the sickness we are receiving now. The story of the Marshallese people since the nuclear weapons tests has been sad and painful. Allow our experience, now, to save others such sadness and pain. (Lijon Eknilang – Marshall Islands)

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Texts of Darlene Keju-Johnston and Lijon Eknilang are taken from: Zohl dé Ishtar (ed.): Pacific Women Speak Out. For Independence and Denuclearisation. Christchurch 1998.

Picture: The National Geographic Magazine, July 1946, p. 101.