

Islanders afraid to go home 60 years after Bikini Atoll H-bomb

March 1 2014, by Giff Johnson

The Marshall Islands marks 60 years since the devastating US hydrogen bomb test at Bikini Atoll Saturday, with angry exiled residents saying they are too fearful ever to go home.

Part of the intense Cold War nuclear arms race, the 15-megaton Bravo test on March 1, 1954 was a thousand times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

It vaporised one island and exposed thousands in the surrounding area to radioactive fallout.

As those who remember that terrifying day and younger generations gather in the Marshall Islands' capital of Majuro to commemorate the anniversary, many exiles refuse to go back to the zones that were contaminated, despite US safety assurances.

"I won't move there," Evelyn Ralpho-Jeadrik, 33, said of her home atoll, Rongelap, which was engulfed in a snowstorm of fallout from Bravo and evacuated two days after the test.

"I do not believe it's safe and I don't want to put my children at risk."

People returned to live on Rongelap in 1957 but fled again in 1985 amid fears—later proved correct—about residual radiation.

One of the more than 60 islands in Rongelap has been cleaned up as part

of a US-funded \$45 million programme, but Ralpho-Jeadrik has no intention of going back.

"I will be forever fearful. The US told my mother it was safe and they returned to Rongelap only to be contaminated again," she said.

It is not just their homes which have been lost, says Lani Kramer, 42, a councilwoman in Bikini's local government, but an entire swathe of the islands' culture.

"As a result of being displaced, we've lost our cultural heritage—our traditional customs and skills, which for thousands of years were passed down from generation to generation," she said.

Bikini islanders have lived in exile since they were moved for the first weapons tests in 1946, when Kramer's own grandparents were evacuated.

When US government scientists declared Bikini safe for resettlement, some residents were allowed to return in the early 1970s.

But they were removed again in 1978 after ingesting high levels of radiation from eating local foods grown on the former nuclear test site.

'The sky turned red'

"After they were exposed like that I can never trust what the US tells us (about Bikini)," said Kramer who says she wants justice for the generations forced to leave.

"We need to go to the US Congress. But no one, not my local government or the national government, is engaged with the US Congress on this issue right now."

The US has expressed regret about islanders' exposure to high doses of radiation during the Bravo test.

"While international scientists did study the effects of that accident on the human population unintentionally affected, the United States never intended for Marshallese to be hurt by the tests," the US embassy in Majuro says on its website.

Acting US under secretary of state Rose Gottemoeller is participating in remembrance day activities in Majuro.

Also attending the week-long commemorations, which include a parade on Saturday, is 80-year-old Matashichi Oishi—one of 23 fishermen aboard the Japanese Lucky Dragon boat, which was 60 miles (100 kilometres) from the bomb.

"I remember the brilliant flash in the west, the frightening sound that followed, and the extraordinary sky which turned red as far as I could see," he said.

All of the crew became sick and many died from their illnesses—their plight is well-known in Japan, with echoes of the victims at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

A visiting group of Japanese students from the Fukushima nuclear disaster zone have also been sharing their experiences.

"The government says 'don't worry'(about radiation exposure) but recently we've seen many cases of thyroid problems be confirmed in the Fukushima area," said Kai Sato, a Fukushima University student.

"People don't know what is the correct information to believe."

US nuclear experiments in the Marshall Islands ended in 1958 after 67 tests.

But a UN report in 2012 said the effects were longlasting.

Special Rapporteur Calin Georgescu, in his report to the UN Human Rights Council, said that "near-irreversible environmental contamination" had led to the loss of livelihoods and many people continued to experience "indefinite displacement".

The report called for the US to provide extra compensation to settle claims by nuclear-affected Marshall islanders and end a "legacy of distrust".

The Nuclear Claims Tribunal awarded more than \$2 billion in personal injury and land damage claims arising from the nuclear tests, but stopped paying after a US-provided \$150 million compensation fund was exhausted.

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