

# Micronesians Still Victimized

by Glenn Barlow

The United Nations Security Council is currently considering a new nuclear military treaty between the United States and Micronesia, a vast region of the North Pacific that is larger than the continental United States. Prior to World War Two, the Micronesians were one of the most isolated island cultures on the planet. Their innocence and isolation were shattered forever when Americans began testing atmospheric nuclear explosions on Bikini less than one year after the Hiroshima bombing. Today, Micronesia is used to test President Reagan's Star Wars technology and ICBMs,

1,000 times more destructive than the Hiroshima atomic bomb.

## MICRONESIAN NUCLEAR TEST VICTIMS

Many Micronesians believe that they were used by Americans as "guinea pigs" to study the effects of massive nuclear war tests. Now the Reagan administration has negotiated a clause in the Compact (Section 77) that forbids Micronesians from seeking compensation in U.S. courts for damages done to them as a result of U.S. nuclear tests.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the United States spent \$2.5 billion on its nuclear tests

code named "Bravo," at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. "Bravo" was the largest bomb ever exploded by the United States although other bombs tested on Bikini in 1954 yielded six, nine, 11 and 13.5 megatons. Altogether, the United States exploded 66 nuclear bombs in the atmosphere at Bikini and Enewetak in the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958. A 1978 Department of Energy report admitted that 14 different atolls in the northern Marshalls "received intermediate range fallout from one or more of the megaton range tests."

## GUINEA PIGS?

Shortly after the people of Rongelap were exposed to high levels of radioactivity from the "Bravo" test in 1954, Brookhaven National Laboratory began a monitoring program to track the effects of the fallout on the people. At the beginning of the program one of the scientists stated that "the habitation of these people on the island will afford most valuable ecological radiation data on human beings."

The inhabitants of Bikini and Enewetak were evacuated from their island homes prior to the nuclear tests to avoid exposure to radioactive fallout. The inhabitants of Rongelap, Utirik and other northern atolls in the Marshalls were not so fortunate. They were exposed to high doses of fallout from the "Bravo" test, as well as unmeasured amounts from previous and subsequent tests. Many Marshallese believe the Rongelapese were used as "guinea pigs" to study the effects of radioactive fallout on human populations. The United States claims that their exposure from the "Bravo" test was accidental, caused by an "unpredicted shift in the winds." The facts tell a different story.

In 1982, a formerly classified document was made public that stated that test site authorities had official confirmation hours prior to the test that winds were blowing toward inhabited islands to the east. A senior American weather technician stationed on Rongerik Atoll, just to the east of Rongelap at the time of the test had the following comment: "The wind had been

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including Trident and MX missiles.

The new treaty, called a "Compact of Free Association," recently passed the U.S. Senate. The Compact will replace a 40-year-old relationship between the United States and Micronesia created by the United Nations after World War II. The United States was allowed to administer Micronesia as a "Strategic Trust Territory;" of the 11 U.N. trust territories created after the war, Micronesia was the only one called "strategic" and it is the only one that remains a trust territory today.

In exchange for the Micronesians' Trust, the United States was mandated by the United Nations to protect the health and property of the natives. In blatant violation of that treaty with the United Nations, the United States destroyed the health and property of the Micronesians by exploding 66 enormous atmospheric nuclear bombs in Micronesia between 1946 and 1958. In 1954 alone, the United States tested many hydrogen bombs at Bikini that were each

in the Marshall Islands, a part of Micronesia. Three-thousand Marshallese have filed lawsuits in U.S. courts seeking \$7 billion in damages resulting from those tests. Under the Compact of Free Association, the United States has offered the nuclear test victims a \$150 million trust to settle these claims. In exchange for the trust fund, the Marshallese government has agreed that its citizens would be barred from seeking further redress in U.S. courts, even if the delayed effects of radiation exposure cause further cancers and genetic mutations in children, and even if radioactive contamination cannot be removed from their islands, water and food chain.

Some of the Marshall Islands have been declared off-limits indefinitely; delayed effects of radiation exposure are even today causing cancers and other health problems in survivors of the American tests in Micronesia.

On March 1, 1954, the United States exploded a 15-megaton hydrogen bomb,



blowing straight at us for days before the test. It was blowing straight at us during the test, and straight at us after it. The wind never shifted."

The inhabitants of Rongelap and other inhabited islands that were downwind of the nuclear explosions on Bikini were not warned that the tests were going to take place, nor were they told what precautions they should take in case of exposure to radioactive fallout.

The fallout from "Bravo" began to land on the people on Rongelap, which lies 100 miles east of Bikini, within four hours after the explosion. Although American authorities knew of the fallout pattern, they made no attempt to evacuate the Rongelapese until more than 48 hours after the test, when they were evacuated to Kwajalein. On the day after the test, however, radiation monitoring personnel were sent to Rongelap by seaplane to take radiation measurements. They merely told the islanders not to drink any water, and left 20 minutes later, without offering any advice as to how they might minimize the effects from the radioactive fallout. Such precautions could have lessened the severe beta radiation burns these people suffered from later.

It has been estimated that the Rongelap people received doses of approximately 175 rads, although independent analyses of the data have suggested that it may have been much higher than that. The Rongelapese had all the symptoms of severe radiation exposure: nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, itching and burning of the skin, eyes and mouth. They suffered from skin burns over much of their bodies, and lost much of their hair within two weeks. Since 1954, these people have suffered high rates of thyroid cancer, leukemia, stillbirths, miscarriages, and children have been born deformed or retarded.

The Rongelap people were returned to their islands in 1957, in spite of the fact that their islands had been continually dosed with fallout from nuclear tests during their absence. No "cleanup" of radiation was ever conducted, unlike at Enewetak, where the U.S. government spent millions on

clean-up operations. In 1979, an aerial radiation study of the northern Marshalls conducted by the United States revealed high levels of residual radiation on Rongelap atoll — in some places even higher than at Bikini itself! Residents were advised that the northern islands in their atoll, which they had been using regularly for gathering food, were too radioactive to be visited. They were advised of this unfortunate fact 22 years after they had been returned to their islands with assurances that there was no danger from radiation!

The Rongelapese did not want to leave their ancestral homelands, but they decided that they could not handle more traumas of

for some tests to be done. They were never allowed to return. Many of their islands were blasted off the face of the earth. The rest are radioactive forever, or at least for the half million years it takes plutonium to stop being carcinogenic. Thus, the Paradise that was Bikini is now Paradise Lost.

In 1985, the Bikinians tried to buy some property on Maui, but the Americans in Hawaii protested that they did not want radioactive refugees as neighbors. These Micronesians probably feel that Americans should have had more compassion for the innocent islanders who were victimized by American nuclear war tests. Many Micronesians also believe that Section 77 should

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their children dying of cancers or being born dead or deformed. So, in 1979, they began asking the U.S. Congress for the small amount of money needed to help them move and build homes on another island. Congress dragged its feet and never appropriated the money, so in 1985 the Rongelapese accepted an offer from Greenpeace to help them to move. The Greenpeace flagship, the *Rainbow Warrior*, carried them to their new homes on Ebadon Island in May 1985, prior to the sinking of that ship by the French government in July 1985. The U.S. government did not provide one penny to help the people of Rongelap relocate from their radioactive homelands.

Most Micronesians have been sincere Christians since the arrival of the American missionaries. In 1946, the people of Bikini were told by Americans during Christian church services that it was God's will and for the good of all humankind that they should temporarily leave their home islands

be removed from the new Compact so that these nuclear test victims can seek justice in the U.S. courts for the traumatic damages that have been inflicted on them by Americans caught up in the arms race. The Soviets have threatened to veto the Compact in the United Nations Security Council. In that case the Compact would go before the U.N. General Assembly for a vote.

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**MICRONESIA IN TODAY'S ARMS RACE**

Since 1959, the United States has used part of Micronesia, Kwajalein Atoll, as a major nuclear missile target range. Traditionally, Kwajalein has been administered and policed by U.S. Army personnel from Alabama who have been repeatedly accused of racist oppression towards the "brown people" of Micronesia.

Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands is

## Micronesians

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the largest coral atoll in the world, with 93 small islands circling a lagoon of over 840 square miles. Hundreds of ICBMs have been fired from Vandenberg and Point Mugu in California to "splash down" in the lagoon at Kwajalein. Islands have been appropriated by the military for testing of various strategic nuclear programs over the years, including the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) programs of the fifties and sixties. Today, the U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force all use Kwajalein's various facilities, and the base usually has about six separate programs operating at a time.

What is the cost for these programs? The staggering financial cost is more than matched by the cost in human terms to the Marshallese people who own Kwajalein Atoll. Since the late fifties they have been forced off their islands throughout Kwajalein and "resettled," primarily on tiny Ebeye island. There are now nearly 8,000 Marshallese living on Ebeye, which has a mere 66 acres of living area. They are treated like second-class citizens on their own islands, while the 3,000 American technicians live in air-conditioned comfort on 900-acre Kwajalein Island, just three miles away. There is a sharp contrast between the green, manicured lawns, golf course, smart housing and recreation areas for the Americans on Kwajalein and the unbelievably overcrowded, run-down conditions on Ebeye.

Kwajalein landowners continue to fight for just compensation for the use of their



lands and for decent living and working conditions for their people. However, many of them are very concerned about the implications of the weapons systems being tested in their islands. "Operation Homecoming," the massive 1982 protest occupation of the off-limits islands in the test range, as well as several occupations of Kwajalein in 1984 and 1985, were not only protests about payments, lease agreements and job discrimination. They were also about the contamination of the lagoon with Uranium-238 from dummy warheads, and health effects of nonionizing radiation from the numerous powerful radar installations that dot their atoll. These protests were clear signals that the Kwajalein landowners intend to assert more control over their land and their future — a future which many of them wish would take Kwajalein Atoll off of center stage in the nuclear arms race.

*Glenn Barlow works as a media consultant in film and television production and has taught Environmental Studies and Politics classes at UCSC. His writings have been published by Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, and UCSC.*