

29 Years After U.S. Moved Them, Bikini Natives Sue for Return of Atoll

By JON NORDHEIMER

Special to The New York Times

HONOLULU, Oct. 16—Twenty-nine years after they were removed from their Pacific atoll to clear the way for the peacetime testing of nuclear weapons, the exiled people of Bikini are suing the United States Government to safeguard the return to their island home.

In a suit filed in Federal District Court here, the Bikinians charged that agencies of the Government had failed in their obligation to protect the natives who had already returned to the island.

The islanders contended that inadequate measurements of the levels of radioactivity on Bikini might have endangered about 75 persons now living there.

In a larger sense, the suit seeks to resolve the entire resettlement issue, and reflects a loss of confidence that the Government will ever allow all the islanders to return to the nuclear-wasted atoll.

Promised Return in 1968

The Bikinians, 816 in number, had been promised a permanent return since 1968, when President Johnson announced that radiation levels at Bikini had dropped beneath the danger point for habitation.

The first move toward resettlement began in 1972 when three families and workers returned to Bikini to build homes and replant vegetation blasted

away by the 23 atomic and hydrogen devices exploded at the atoll between 1946 and 1958.

But last August, the Energy Research and Development Administration reversed earlier assessments and said that the island, its drinking water and plant life were still contaminated.

Fearful that the long-awaited return was again being indefinitely postponed, the islanders—most of whom live in poverty on a small, remote island elsewhere in the Marshall Islands chain—decided to go to court for the first time to protect their interests.

Their suit calls first for a complete scientific survey of the island of Bikini to determine finally if it is fit for human life. So far, the suit maintained, the Government has approached the problem in an uneven, slipshod way, refusing to employ highly sophisticated technical equipment to measure radiation there.

Radiation Checks Asked

The Bikinians also asked the court to order the Government to relocate temporarily the men and women living at present on Bikini, and to use the best methods available to check them for harmful effects of radiation.

So far, despite the nuclear agency's warning, all Government physicians have done

is to examine urine specimens of those on the island, according to lawyers of the Micronesian Legal Services Corporation, an antipoverty agency representing the islanders.

Some of the new settlers have been drinking water from the ground and consuming vegetables on the island for nearly three years, it was noted.

"We had already started to worry when the palm seedlings we planted turned orange," said one of the Bikini leaders in Honolulu to file the suit.

The bulk of the Bikinians and their dependents live on the remote island of Kili, about 450 miles southeast of the atoll, spending most of the years of exile in isolation and despair.

Lore Kessibuki, the magistrate at Kili, said that the 163 natives of Bikini had no option but to comply when the Navy "temporarily" relocated them in 1946 so that the atomic testing program called Operation Crossroads could be conducted at the atoll.

"They had all the power," Mr. Kessibuki said in Marshallese, the language of the islanders. "We were in fear."

Until American forces landed in Bikini in 1944, the island had been under Japanese control since 1914. Before that, it had been run by German colonialists who marketed dried copra produced from rich Bikini coconut palm groves.

The atoll was a ring of 26 small islands forming a circle with a 24-mile-wide lagoon in the center. The island of Bikini, on the eastern side of the ring, is two miles long, but has a total area of only two-thirds of a square mile.

Nuclear testing in the postwar period sank thousands of tons of World War II warships moored in the lagoon, and destroyed several islands of the western ring, opening a new deep channel from the ocean into the lagoon.

The twisted wreckage on the bottom of the lagoon is the largest single source of plutonium pollution in the world, according to George M. Allen, legal counsel for the islanders. Mr. Allen, 32 years old, quit a lucrative Denver law practice to do antipoverty work in Micronesia.

The nuclear explosions at the atoll stripped all the trees off Bikini, and the island is covered today by a scrub vegetation, in addition to the seedlings recently planted. The toxic nature of sea life inside the lagoon is not entirely known, Mr. Allen said, but one

change has been the introduction of large sharks that enter from the new underwater passageway opened in the reefs.

Mr. Allen said that Government medical and scientific experts were still divided on the issue of safety for any inhabitants of the island, and the suit asks the court to order extensive tests to resolve the issue—steps that have not yet been undertaken by the government despite the decision to allow partial resettlement since 1972.

There have been no reports of any radiation illness, though concern has been expressed for the long-term effects of such exposure.

The Bikinians docilely left the atoll in 1946 with the few possessions they could carry, and were transported by the Navy to Rongerik, an island where American Seabees had hastily assembled makeshift dwellings laid out in a community resembling an American suburb instead of traditional island patterns that respected divisions of family households and power.

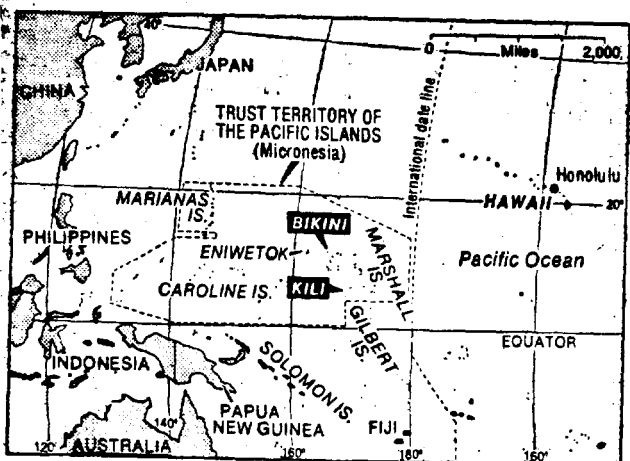
Rongerik was not an atoll and had no lagoon for fishing, and its coconut and breadfruit resources were no sufficient to sustain the new population. By early 1948 the transplanted Bikinians were starving to death.

The Navy rescued them, and after a stay of several months on the island of Kwajalein, the islanders were removed to Kili. Kili was also without a lagoon and had about one-sixth the land area of their former home. Also, Kili had more than five times the annual rainfall, and the axis of the diamond-shaped island provided no leeward, or sheltered, side during the strong northeasterly trade winds of the winter months, so supplies could not be landed by boat for four or five months of the year.

Even during calmer periods it required four days by supply boat to reach the island from the nearest airstrip.

The islanders were told in the nineteen-fifties, Mr. Kessibuki said, that the Bikini atoll was so polluted with radioactivity that there was no likelihood that people could ever return.

Those were years of great depression and despair, he said, and greater dependency on the United States Government for food supplies to augment the meager resources of Kili. Some natives managed to leave the island and find employment elsewhere in the Marshall chain, and today there are 378 Bikini-related people living away from the main continent on Kili.



The New York Times/Oct. 17, 1975

Many Bikini Islanders have lived on Kili for years