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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 covered 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.

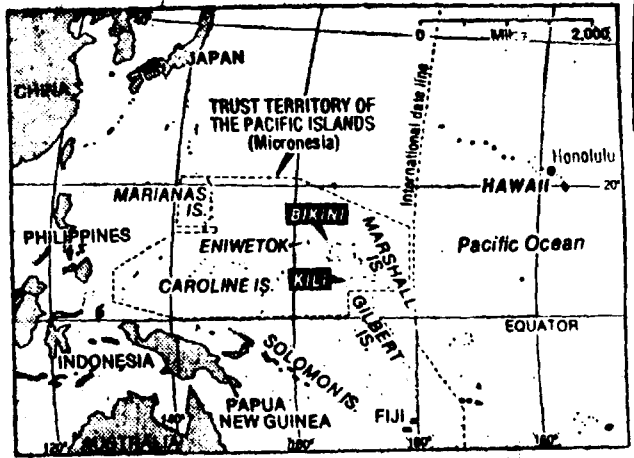
The bulk of the Bikinians and their dependents live on the remote island of Kili, about 450 miles southeast of the atoll, spending most of the years of exile in isolation and despair.

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



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Many Bikini Islanders have lived on Kili for years

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

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