

Islanders Want The Truth About Bikini Nuclear Test

Yoichi Funabashi

Islanders Want The Truth About Bikini Nuclear Test

by Yoichi Funabashi

From 1946 to 1958, the United States conducted 67 nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands. The total volume translates into 7,000 Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs detonated at the pace of 11 a week. In particular, the hydrogen bomb tested in Bikini Atoll on March 1, 1954, named Bravo, had an explosive force equivalent to 1,000 Hiroshima-sized bombs.

The inhabitants of Rongelap Atoll, supposedly outside the danger zone, and the crew of the Japanese boat No. 5 Fukuryu Maru (Lucky Dragon), which was fishing for tuna in supposedly safe waters, were showered with radioactive fallout from the Bravo shot. (Six months later, chief radio operator Aikichi Kuboyama died.)

It has been 50 years since the tragedy at Bikini.

At the time, the Marshall Islands, including Bikini, were a United Nations trust territory under U.S. administration. A year before the islands became trust territory, the U.S. Navy approached the islanders and asked to use their land for nuclear testing. Although it was supposed to be a temporary agreement, it turned out to be "permanent."

Currently, the area is an important U.S. missile defense base and the United States and the Marshall Islands recently agreed to extend the term of lease for the U.S. base until 2066. The lease provides a major source of income for the Marshall Islands.

During the 1980s, the Marshall Islands signed a "Compact of Free Association" with the United States and became the Republic of the Marshall Islands. Based on that agreement, since 1986, the United States has paid compensation to the inhabitants of Bikini, Rongelap, Enewetak and Utirik atolls, to which it caused direct damage through nuclear testing.

However, the U.S. government and the islanders have been at loggerheads over the "truth about Bikini."

U.S.: The exposure of the inhabitants of Rongelap, which was outside the danger zone to radioactive material, was caused by an unexpected shift in the winds.

Islanders: The United States knew beforehand that the winds were changing. Despite this knowledge, it did not immediately evacuate residents on the leeward and failed to meet its obligation of trusteeship, which requires it to protect residents under its administration.

U.S.: The United States has been providing medical care sincerely to residents who were exposed to radiation.

Islanders: It is true that the United States has provided medical care but its main purpose was to gather scientific and military data that put "research before treatment." The residents of Rongelap who were returned to the island were later evacuated for a second time.

U.S.: Only the residents of Rongelap and Utirik were exposed to radioactive fallout exceeding dangerous levels from the Bravo test.

Islanders: While only the inhabitants of four atolls receive medical subsidies, diseases related to nuclear contamination such as cancer are affecting many other islanders as well.

After the Cold War, the U.S. administration under President Bill Clinton declassified a substantial portion of official documents concerning the Bravo test kept by the government at the time. The documents revealed that:

- (1) The military had predicted that the winds were going to change.
- (2) It had injected radioactive substances into Rongelap residents and fed them drinks containing such substances.
- (3) The United States had planned beforehand to implement "Project 4.1" to study the effects of nuclear radiation on human beings with residents exposed to radioactive fallout. (See Holly M. Barker's *Bravo for the Marshallese: Regaining Control in a Post-Nuclear, Post-Colonial World*, published by Wadsworth in 2004.)

While it cannot be said that the entire study was aimed at conducting experiments on humans, the U.S. government has admitted that some part of the study deviated from purely treatment purposes.

I asked Marshall Islands Foreign Minister Gerard Zackios for his views by telephone. Zackios told me that there was still a mountain of things that needs to be done, including providing medical care, cleaning up the environment, providing additional compensation and resettling islanders. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Bravo shot, the Marshall Islands wants Americans and people around the world to know the dreadful consequences of nuclear tests and that problems resulting from the tests remain

unsettled to date. He stated that the government will "continuously push" for congressional public hearings to resolve the problems.

The residents are still unable to dispel doubt that they were made the subjects of human experiments. They want the United States to give a final answer to that question.

Whatever it takes, "we want to know the nature of the program that happened here," Zackios said. Although the U.S. government has disclosed some official documents, certain paragraphs have been "marked in black ink or been identified as 'Information Confidential.'" The Marshallese want to know the truth about the project.

The tragedy of No. 5 Fukuryu Maru, which was sprinkled with radioactive dust near Bikini Atoll, gave rise to the postwar anti-nuclear movement in Japan.

Japan's anti-nuclear movement encountered various problems such as the clash of Socialist-Communist factional interests, excessive victim psychology and anti-American sentiments among some people and the trend to ritualize "prayers" and "anger." At the same time, however, the Bikini fallout also led us to take a new look at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But the Japanese perspective on the Bikini tragedy tended to focus on Japan's position as a victim that shared the same agony and hardly addressed its prewar responsibility for encouraging the militarization and colonization of the Marshall Islands.

Even though Japan has identified the Marshall Islands as a country that shared the same experience, the Japanese have long called theirs "the only country that experienced atomic bombings."



The author is an Asahi Shimbun senior staff writer and foreign affairs columnist. This

article appeared in the International Herald Tribune/Asahi Shimbun, March 2, 2004. Posted at Japan Focus on March 3, 2004.