Maza Attari [left], who was a seven-year-old resident of the Marshall Islands when the US exploded the Bravo H-bomb, outside his Kalihi home. Unidentified child, 1957, Rongelap repatriation photo by Jack A. Tobin.

Nuclear Guinea Pigs

On the eve of APEC, the US continues to ignore the reparations claims of Marshall Islanders

BY BEVERLY ANN DEEPE KEEVER | NOV 9, 2011

Also see:  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fg7Zuk9Wp4&feature=player_embedded#!
In the old-timey section of Kalihi, tucked between auto repair shops and boarded-up storefronts, Maza Attari, a Marshall Islander, lived with four family members in a one-bedroom apartment barely bigger than a ping-pong table. When visited by this reporter last summer, Attari had been unable to find steady work since being flown to Honolulu 12 years ago for back surgery that had left him with a severe limp and weakened muscles.

Attari’s circumstances exemplify the far-reaching impacts of nuclear testing upon irradiated, exiled or dislocated Marshall Islanders. Their home atolls—lying 3,000 miles west of Hawaii—served as experimental grounds where the U.S. detonated nuclear weapons and tested delivery systems in the transition from conventional bombers to intercontinental missiles. In all, from 1946 to 1962, the U.S. exploded 86 bombs in the Marshalls, neighboring Pacific waters and at Johnston Island, which lies only 800 miles from Hawaii.

A one-time magistrate and mayor on Utrik, Attari said last summer that he doubted he would be able to return there, prophesying instead, “I’m going to stay here until I die.” He died in September of this year, without ever receiving the reparations that he and other nuclear victims have claimed.

The debt

It is a debt that is not only owed them, but that has compounded over time. Because these nuclear weapons experiments were too dangerous and unpredictable to be conducted on the US mainland, Attari and other Marshallese are part of the reason for America’s superpower status today. A half-century later, the Marshall Islands continue to serve as a crucial part of an outer defense periphery for the US heartland—6,000 miles away. That periphery includes the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site, where for more than three
decades missiles fired from 4,000 miles away (at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California) have crashed near Kwajalein Atoll, horribly frightening the indigenous inhabitants and leaving them unsure of where the debris will fall.

A child out of time

Attari was 7 years old and living on Utrik Island on March 1, 1954, when the US unleashed the most destructive weapon in its history—the 15-megaton hydrogen bomb, code-named Bravo. It was early in the morning, and his family members leaped up when they heard a deafening noise. “Everyone was surprised,” he explains. Radioactive fallout contaminated the uncovered cement containers used for drinking water and local food. “Too bad,” US officials said when they arrived days later to begin evacuating 239 sickened inhabitants of Utrik and Rongelap atolls to the Kwajalein naval base.

Snow-like radioactive particles fell 100 to 125 miles away on property and persons on these atolls, who had not been evacuated beforehand or alerted about precautions to take.

The British government, between 1957 and 1958 conducted nine atmospheric tests, yielding the equivalent of about 12,000,000 tons of TNT, and the French carried out 193 Pacific nuclear tests yielding the equivalent of about 13,500,000 tons beginning in 1962 and ending on Jan. 27, 1996. The British and French data were recently gleaned from hard-to-find sources and compiled by University of Hawaii botany professor Mark Merlin and graduate student Ricardo Gonzalez, enabling them to reveal for the first time a pathbreaking, half-century panorama of the environmental consequences of Pacific nuclear testing conducted by all three nations.

The things they carried

As a result, many exposed Islanders have since suffered from or been operated on for abnormalities of the thyroid, which can lead to stunted growth, mental retardation and cancer. Like many on Utrik, Attari said, his sister died of cancer and three brothers with thyroid abnormalities have also died. Attari had not been subjected to surgery but he medicated his thyroid by daily taking US-supplied white, pea-size tablets called levothyroxin. He continued to be monitored at least
twice a year by US Department of Energy medical teams who study Bravo-exposed islanders in a program kept secret for 40 years.

After three months on Kwajalein, Attari and other Utrik residents were returned home. But it was three years before the more severely contaminated Rongelapese, who suffered skin burns, vomiting, hair loss and diarrhea, were returned to their ancestral island. US photographers extensively documented the move—labeled “Rongelap Repatriation”—that included mug shots of the returnees.

**The pain of exile**

It caused some Marshallese to endure the pain and suffering of a long list of verified diseases and exiled them from their ancestral homelands where they had maintained their way of life and a self-sufficient livelihood. It contaminated their islands and marine life, in some cases for decades, if not centuries. It vaporized some of their precious lands and moonscaped others, as shown by the bombing craters on Enewetak.

The Bikini islanders, for example, were uprooted in 1946 so that their atoll could serve as a Pacific proving ground for the first US nuclear test and are still exiled today. That first test at Bikini inspired creation of the two-piece swimsuit that has ever since populated Waikiki and beaches worldwide. But Bikinians are ignored in their petition for more funding from the US government for land damages and numerous other claims that exceed earlier payments. The testing prompted one irradiated Rongelap woman to exclaim, Americans “are smart at doing stupid things.”

**An almost-forever poison**

The Bravo H-bomb was 1,000 times more powerful than the bomb detonated above Hiroshima and it was laced with plutonium, one of the planet’s most deadly substances with a radioactive existence of half a million years that may be hazardous to humans for at least half that time. In addition, Bravo and other US Pacific tests were launched in the atmosphere or underwater, which spewed radioactive mist, pulverized coral and snow-flake-like particles high into the air and, most disastrously, across the Pacific, landing on peoples and soils where it
could be absorbed or inhaled for decades and will continue as hazards for a near-eternity.

Unwittingly and unknowingly, Attari and other Pacific islanders had been thrust from an oral culture into the atomic age; without a vocabulary word for radioactivity, they began calling it a poison and to describe themselves as poisoned people. Attari and the other Bravo–contaminated Marshallese entered history as the first-ever examples of the effects of radioactive fallout on humans who had escaped a nuclear explosion. Unlike the wartime victims of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic-weapons explosions, a historian notes, Pacific Islanders who experienced the peacetime tests are important because “they have already lived in what might be our common future.”

**APEC and forgotten islanders**

Attari and other Marshallese have battled for more than a decade in the US courts, before Congress and with the Bush administration for more funds to pay greater-than-anticipated costs of their health care, property damages, resettlement, cleanup, and compensation for their vaporized islands. A 1995 study by the Congressional Research Service advised Congress that the Marshallese health-related claims and loss-of-land methodologies were reasonable and appropriate but their multi-billion-dollar estimates needed more analysis. The islanders are still awaiting a favorable nod from President Obama, in town this week for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference.

Leaders joining President Obama this week hail from 21 countries including the Russian Federation, People’s Republic of China, Japan, Indonesia, Brunei, Papua New Guinea, Singapore, New Zealand and Hong Kong. But missing will be the voices and concerns of many peoples of the so-called Small Island States, scattered amidst about 25,000 atolls, islets and islands, that experienced the economic havoc and uniquely violent history that have transformed the Pacific region during half a century. Nor is the Marshallese multi-billion-dollar petition now confronting Obama and Congress on the agenda of APEC leaders, despite its relevance to the continuing controversy cast by Fukushima’s nuclear disaster.

Long before the fears of drifting contamination seeded by Chernobyl and Fukushima, Bravo and the other shots in the H-Bomb era produced radioactive
components that encircled the globe, settling silently from the heavens. One exhaustive study titled “Atomic Audit” concluded that fallout and other residual radioactivity from atmospheric nuclear testing by all nations have caused or will cause through infinity an estimated 3 million premature cancer deaths. As a result, University of Hawaii scientist John Harrison explained, all organisms, including humans, carry the watermark of the nuclear era woven into their bodies, thus changing “the chemical signature of our bones.”

Guinea pigs

Not until 1994, 40 years after Bravo’s fallout, did Attari and other exposed islanders learn they were used as human subjects to research the effects of radioactive fallout and of living. Within days after Bravo, while still at the naval base to which they had been evacuated, Rongelap and Utrik Islanders were incorporated into Project 4.1. They were neither asked for nor gave their informed consent, nor were told the risks of the studies for which they gained no benefit.

Titled the “Study of Response of Human Beings Exposed to Significant Beta and Gamma Radiation Due to Fallout from High Yield Weapons, the document was classified “Secret Restricted Data.”

Seven weeks after Bravo, on April 21, the lead US doctor examining them, Dr. E.P. Cronkite, recommended to military officials in Honolulu that these Marshallese should probably be exposed to no more radiation for the rest of their “natural lives.” Despite this recommendation, after three years, US officials in 1957 assured the Rongelapese that their radioactive homeland was safe and returned them there. Rongelapese remained in their radioactive homeland for 28 years. They were shocked to learn that a 1982 US Department of Energy report indicated that parts of Rongelap, where some were living, “were as contaminated as those forbidden to humans.” As a result, in 1985, the islanders beseeched US officials to move them. The US refused. So 70 islanders were removed by the Greenpeace environmental organization. During those years on Rongelap, they lived in an environment that had been contaminated not only by Bravo and five other shots in 1954 but also by the residue from 17 shots in 1956 and 32 shots in 1958. Data on radiation levels from tests in 1956 and 1958, when combined yield greater than Bravo, have been requested by the Marshallese government but almost 50 years later US officials had yet to disclose them.
During these years, many Marshallese lost their lives or loved ones as exemplified by John Anjain, the mayor of Rongelap in 1954. Because of the fallout, he and four members of his family were operated on for thyroid tumors. His wife’s tumor killed her. His son, who was one year old at the time of Bravo, had a thyroid tumor removed when he was 12 and died seven years later from leukemia. The elder Anjain died in Honolulu’s Straub Hospital in 2004 at age 83.

Denying the experiment

Anjain had accused US officials of using the islanders as “guinea pigs” for regularly monitoring their health for decades without providing them medical treatment. But in October 1995 an advisory committee appointed by President William Clinton “found no evidence that the initial exposure of the Rongelapese or their later relocation constituted a deliberate human experiment.”

Since being rescued by Greenpeace, Rongelapese have been living 100 miles away on Majetto Island, sustained by US aid. The US has provided $45 million to establish a Rongelap Resettlement Trust Fund that has led to cleaning up soil on parts of the main island but not on all of the 60 or so islets in the atoll that are used for food gathering. Some houses, a church, power plant, water-making equipment and paved roads now dot parts of Rongelap Island.

US officials are vowing this autumn to cut US aid to those electing to remain at Majetto rather than to repatriate home.

Rongelapese are reluctant to return. “Resettling the people of Rongelap under rules severely restricting their ability to move about their homeland, or to gather food from their traditional sources, does not constitute sensible repatriation,” Marshallese Sen. Michael Kabua, a member of the Rongelap Atoll Local Government Council, told a US House subcommittee on May 20, 2010. The people do not want to return, he said, “to a land where the future well-being of their children will be in jeopardy, and where they themselves cannot be assured of safety and security,” and where “they will remain as strangers in their own home.” And they remember the sad history of the Americans repatriating islanders to their heavily radioactive homelands on the assurance they were safe only to learn otherwise decades and heartbreaks later.
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