

After the war, in December of 1945, President Harry S. Truman issued a directive to Army and Navy officials that joint testing of nuclear weapons would be necessary "to determine the effect of atomic bombs on American warships." Bikini, because of its location away from regular air and sea routes, was chosen to be the new nuclear proving ground for the United States government.



In February of 1946 Commodore Ben H. Wyatt, the military governor of the Marshalls, traveled to Bikini. On a Sunday after church, he assembled the Bikinians to ask if they would be willing to leave their atoll temporarily so that the United States could begin testing atomic bombs for "the good of mankind and to end all world wars." King Juda, then the leader of the Bikinian people, stood up after much confused and sorrowful deliberation among his people, and announced, "We will go believing that everything is in the hands of God."



While the 167 Bikinians were getting ready for their exodus, preparations for the U.S. nuclear testing program advanced rapidly. Some 242 naval ships, 156 aircraft, 25,000 radiation recording devices and the Navy's 5,400 experimental rats, goats and pigs soon began to arrive for the tests.

Over 42,000 U.S. military and civilian personnel were involved in the testing program at Bikini.

The nuclear legacy of the Bikinians began in March of 1946 when they were first removed from their islands in preparation for Operation Crossroads. The history of the Bikinian people from that day has been a story of their struggle to understand scientific concepts as they relate to their islands, as well as the day-to-day problems of finding food, raising families and maintaining their culture amidst the progression of events set in motion by the Cold War that have been for the most part out of their control.

In preparation for Operation Crossroads, the Bikinians were sent 125 miles eastward across the ocean on a U.S. Navy LST landing craft to Rongerik Atoll. The islands of Rongerik Atoll were uninhabited because, traditionally, the Marshallese people considered them to be unlivable due to their size (Rongerik is 1/6 the size of Bikini Atoll) and because they had an inadequate water and food supply. There was also a deep-rooted traditional belief that the atoll was inhabited by evil spirits. The Administration left the Bikinians food stores sufficient only for several weeks. The islanders soon discovered that the coconut trees and other local food crops produced very few fruits when compared to the yield of the trees on Bikini. As the food supply on Rongerik quickly ran out, the Bikinians began to suffer from starvation and fish poisoning due to the lack of edible fish in the lagoon. Within two months after their arrival they began to beg U.S. officials to move them back to Bikini.

In July, the Bikinian leader, Juda, traveled with a U.S. government delegation back to Bikini to view the results of the second atom bomb test of Operation Crossroads, code named Baker. Juda returned to Rongerik and told his people that the island was still intact, that the trees were still there, that Bikini looked the same.



BAKER Day at Bikini Atoll - U.S. Air Force photo

The two atomic bomb blasts of Operation Crossroads were both about the size of the nuclear bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan. Eighteen tons of cinematography equipment and more than half of the world's supply of motion picture film were on hand to record the Able and Baker detonations, and also the movement of the

Bikinians from their atoll.

From December of 1946 through January of 1947, the food shortages worsened on Rongerik; the small population of Bikinians was confronted with near starvation. During the same period of time, the area of Micronesia was designated as a United Nations Strategic Trust Territory (TT) to be administered by the United States. Indeed, it was the only strategic trust ever created by the United Nations. In this agreement, the U.S. committed itself to the United Nations directive to "promote the economic advancement

and self-sufficiency of the inhabitants, and to this end shall...protect the inhabitants against the loss of their lands and resources..." The people of Bikini have long seen the irony in the conduct of the TT agreement that allowed the bombing of their homeland and that forced them into starvation on Rongerik Atoll.

In May of 1947, to make the Bikinians situation on Rongerik even more serious, a huge fire damaged many of the coconut trees. By July, when a medical officer from the U.S. visited the island, the Bikinian people were found to be suffering severely from malnutrition. A team of U.S. investigators determined in the fall, after a visit to Rongerik, that the island had inadequate supplies of food and water and that the Bikinian people should be moved from Rongerik without delay. The U.S. Navy was harshly criticized in the world press for neglecting the Bikinian people on Rongerik. Harold Ickes, a reporter, stated in his 1947 syndicated column "Man to Man" that, "The natives are actually and literally starving to death."



Kili Island, 1996 - Photo © Jack Niedenthal

In November of 1948, after six months on Kwajalein Atoll, the 184 Bikinians set sail once again. This time the destination was Kili Island, their third community relocation in two years.

Starvation also troubled the Bikinians on Kili; this situation led the Trust Territory administration to donate a 40-foot ship to be used for copra transportation between Kili and Jaluit Atoll. Later, in 1951, the boat was washed into the Kili reef by heavy surf and sunk while carrying a full-load of copra. In the following years rough seas and infrequent visits by the field trip ships caused food supplies to run critically low many times on the island and once even required an airdrop of emergency food rations.



1954, the hydrogen detonated on the northwestern corner illuminated by a blinding light. A measured into the at a rate of 300

monstrous cloud, filled with nuclear debris, shot up more than 20 miles and generated winds hundreds of miles per hour. These fiery gusts blasted the surrounding islands and stripped the branches and coconuts from the trees.

Joint Task Force ships, which were stationed about 40 miles east and south of Bikini in positions enabling them to monitor the test, detected the eastward movement of the radioactive cloud from the 15 megaton blast. They recorded a steady increase in radiation levels that became so high that all men were ordered below decks and all hatches and watertight doors were sealed.

Early in the morning on March 1, bomb, code named Bravo, was surface of the reef in the of Bikini Atoll. The area was huge and expanding flash of raging fireball of intense heat that millions of degrees shot skyward miles an hour. Within minutes the

Millions of tons of sand, coral, plant and sea life from Bikini's reef, from three islands [Bokonijien, Aerokojlol,



The Lucky Dragon

[Links page](#)

Nam] and the surrounding lagoon waters were sent high into the air by the blast. One-and-a-half hours after the explosion, 23 fishermen aboard the Japanese fishing vessel, the [Lucky Dragon](#), watched in awe as a "gritty white ash" began to fall on them. The men aboard the ship were oblivious to the fact that the ash was the fallout from a hydrogen bomb test. Shortly after being exposed to the fallout their skin began to itch and they experienced nausea and vomiting. One man died.

Meanwhile, on Rongelap Atoll (located about 125 miles east of Bikini), three to four hours after the blast, the same white, snow-like ash began to fall from the sky onto the 64 people living there and also onto the 18 people residing on Ailinginae Atoll. Bravo was a thousand times more powerful than the Fat Man and Little Boy atomic bombs that were dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima during the end of World War II. Its "success" was beyond the wildest dreams of the American scientists who were involved in the detonation--they thought that the blast would only carry a payload of approximately 3 megatons.



The Rongelapese, not understanding what was happening, watched as two suns rose that morning, observed with amazement as the radioactive dust soon formed a layer on their island two inches deep turning the drinking water a brackish yellow. Children played in the fallout; their mothers watched in horror as night came and they began to show the physical signs of exposure. The people experienced severe vomiting and diarrhea, their hair began to fall out, the island fell into a state of terrified panic. The people had received no explanations or warnings whatsoever from the United States government. Two days after the test the people of Rongelap were finally taken to Kwajalein for medical treatment.



On Bikini Atoll the radiation levels increased dramatically. And, in late March following the Bravo test, the off-limit zones were expanded to include the inhabited atolls of Rongerik, Utirik, Ujelang and Likiep. It is startling to note that none of these islanders were evacuated prior to this blast or even before the subsequent nuclear weapons tests. In the spring of 1954, Bikar, Ailinginae, Rongelap, Rongerik, were all contaminated by the Yankee and Union weapons tests which were detonated on Bikini Atoll. They yielded the equivalent of 6.9 and 13.5 megatons of TNT respectively.

Back on Kili, in January of 1955, the Trust Territory ships continued to have problems unloading food in the rough seas around Kili and the people once again suffered from starvation. The following year the food shortage problems grew even worse. Consequently, the United States decided to give the Bikinians a satellite community

located on public land on Jaluit Atoll, thirty miles to the north. Three families moved to Jaluit. During 1957 other families rotated to Jaluit to take over the responsibilities of producing copra for sale.

During this period the Bikinians signed an agreement with the U.S. government turning over full use rights to Bikini Atoll. According to the agreement, any future claims by the Bikinians based on the use of Bikini by the government of the United States, or on the moving of the Bikinian people from Bikini Atoll to Kili Island, would have to be made against the Bikinian leaders and not against the U.S government. In return for this agreement, the Bikinians were given full use rights to Kili and several islands in Jaluit Atoll which were Trust Territory public lands. In addition, the agreement included \$25,000 in cash and an additional \$300,000 trust fund that yielded a semi-annual interest payment of approximately \$5,000 (about \$15 per person per year). This agreement was made by the Bikinians without the benefit of legal representation.



Typhoon Lola struck Kili late in 1957 causing extensive damage to crops and sinking the Bikinians' supply ship. Shortly afterwards in 1958, Typhoon Ophelia caused widespread destruction on Jaluit and all the other southern atolls. The Bikinians living on Jaluit moved back to Kili because the satellite community became uninhabitable due to the typhoon damage. The Bikinians continued to fight the problems associated with inadequate food supplies throughout 1960.

In 1967, U.S. government agencies began considering the possibility of returning the Bikinian people to their homelands based on data on radiation levels on Bikini Atoll from the U.S. scientific community. This scientific optimism stemmed directly from an Atomic Energy Commission study that stated, "Well water could be used safely by the natives upon their return to Bikini. It appears that radioactivity in the drinking water may be ignored from a radiological safety standpoint...The exposures of radiation that would result from the repatriation of the Bikini people do not offer a significant threat to their health and safety."

Accordingly, in June of 1968 [the story appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*], President Lyndon B. Johnson promised the 540 Bikinians living on Kili and other islands that they would now be able to return to their homeland. The President also stated that, "It is our goal to assist the people of Bikini to build, on these once desolated islands, a new and model community." He then ordered Bikini to be resettled "with all possible dispatch."



In August of 1969 an eight-year plan was prepared for the resettlement of Bikini Atoll in order to give the crops planted on the islands a chance to mature. The first section of the plan involved the clearing of the

radioactive debris on Bikini Island. This segment of the work was designed by the AEC and the U.S. Department of Defense. Responsibility for the second phase of the reclamation, which included the replanting of the atoll, construction of a housing development and the relocation of the community, was assumed by the U.S. Trust Territory government.

By late in the year of 1969 the first cleanup phase was completed. The AEC, in an effort to assure the islanders that their cleanup efforts were successful, issued a statement that said: "There's virtually no radiation left and we can find no discernible effect on either plant or animal life."

All that was theoretically left now in order for the people to return was for the atoll to be rehabilitated, but during the year of 1971 this effort proceeded slowly. The second phase of the rehabilitation encountered serious problems because the U.S. government withdrew their military personnel and equipment. They also brought to an end the weekly air service that had been operating between Kwajalein Atoll and Bikini Atoll. The construction and agricultural projects suffered because of the sporadic shipping schedules and the lack of air service.

In late 1972 the planting of the coconut trees was finally completed. During this period it was discovered that as the coconut crabs grew older on Bikini Island they ate their sloughed-off shells. Those shells contained high levels of radioactivity, hence, the AEC announced that the crabs were still radioactive and could be eaten only in limited numbers. The conflicting information on the radiological contamination of Bikini supplied by the AEC caused the Bikini Council to vote not to return to Bikini at the time previously scheduled by American officials. The Council, however, stated that it would not prevent individuals from making independent decisions to return.

Three extended Bikinian families, their desire to return to Bikini being great enough to outweigh the alleged radiological dangers, moved back to Bikini Island and into the newly constructed cement houses. They were accompanied by approximately 50 Marshallese workers who were involved in the construction and maintenance of the buildings.

The population of islanders on Bikini slowly increased over the years until in June of 1975, during regular monitoring of Bikini, radiological tests discovered "higher levels of radioactivity than originally thought." U.S. Department of Interior officials stated that "Bikini appears to be hotter or questionable as to safety" and an additional report pointed out that some water wells on Bikini Island were also too contaminated with radioactivity for drinking. A couple of months later the AEC, on review of the scientists' data, decided that the local foods grown on Bikini Island, i.e., pandanus, breadfruit and coconut crabs, were also too radioactive for human consumption. Medical tests of urine samples from the 100 people living on Bikini detected the presence of low



levels of plutonium 239 and 240. Robert Conard of Brookhaven Laboratories commented that these readings "are probably not radiologically significant."



In October of 1975, after contemplating these new, terrifying and confusing reports on the radiological condition of their atoll, the Bikinians filed a lawsuit in U.S. federal court demanding that a complete scientific survey of Bikini and the northern Marshalls be conducted. The lawsuit stated that the U.S. had used highly sophisticated and technical radiation detection equipment at Enewetak Atoll, but had refused to employ it at Bikini. The result of the lawsuit was to convince the U.S. to agree to conduct an aerial radiological survey of the northern Marshalls in December of 1975. Unfortunately, more than three years of bureaucratic squabbles between the U.S. Departments of State, Interior and Energy over costs and responsibility for the survey, delayed any action on its implementation. The Bikinians, unaware of the severity of the radiological danger, remained on their contaminated islands.



While waiting for the radiological survey to be conducted, further discoveries of these radiological dangers were made. In May of 1977 the level of radioactive strontium-90 in the well water on Bikini Island was found to exceed the U.S. maximum allowed limits. A month later a Department of Energy study stated that "All living patterns involving Bikini Island exceed Federal [radiation] guidelines for thirty year population doses." Later in the same year, a group of U.S. scientists, while on Bikini, recorded an 11-fold increase in the cesium-137 body burdens of the more than 100 people residing on the island. Alarmed by these numbers, the DOE told the people living on Bikini to eat only one coconut per day and began to ship in food for consumption.

In April of 1978 medical examinations performed by U.S. physicians revealed radiation levels in many of the now 139 people on Bikini to be well above the U.S. maximum permissible level. The very next month U.S. Interior Department officials described the 75% increase in radioactive cesium 137 as "incredible." The Interior Department then announced plans to move the people from Bikini "within 75 to 90 days," and so in September of 1978, Trust Territory officials arrived on Bikini to once again evacuate the people who were living on the atoll. An ironic footnote to the situation is that the long awaited northern Marshalls radiological survey, forced by the 1975 lawsuit brought by the Bikinians against the U.S. government, finally began only after the people were again relocated from Bikini.

In the 1980's, after filing a lawsuit in the U.S. Federal Claims Court [Juda vs. the United States] in 1981 that was eventually dismissed in 1987, the people of Bikini received two

trust funds from the United States government as compensation for giving up their islands to the U.S. government for nuclear testing. You can read about these trust funds on our [Reparations for Damages](#) page.

In the 1990's the Bikinians began a Tourism program on Bikini for those people who might want to visit our historic atoll. You can read about this operation on our [Dive Tourism](#) and the [Sport Fishing](#) pages.

On March 5, 2001, the **Nuclear Claims Tribunal** handed down a decision on a seven year lawsuit the Bikinians had brought against the United States for damages done to their islands and their people during the nuclear testing on Bikini. The Tribunal gave them a total award of \$563,315,500.00 [loss of value \$278,000,000.00, restoration costs \$251,500,000.00, suffering and hardship \$33,814,500.00], which is the final amount after deducting the past compensation awarded by the U.S. government [see above three trust funds]. The problem is that the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, which was created by the Compact of Free Association of 1986, was underfunded and does not have the money to pay for this claim. It is now up to the people of Bikini to petition the U.S. Congress for the money to fulfill this award. This is expected to take many years and it is uncertain if the United States will honor their claim.

On April 12 [April 11 US date], 2006, the people of Bikini Atoll filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Government in the U.S. Court of Federal Claims. The lawsuit seeks compensation under the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution for the taking of their property damage claims resulting from the U.S. Government's failure and refusal to adequately fund the March 5, 2001 order of the Nuclear Claims Tribunal. Alternatively, the people of Bikini seek damages for the U.S. Government's breaches of its fiduciary duty to provide just and adequate compensation for the taking of their lands in consideration for their agreement to move off Bikini Atoll and for the breach of the implied duties and covenants integral to that agreement, the Compact of Free Association, and the Section 177 Agreement. The lawsuit will seek compensation and/or damages of at least \$561,036,320 (which represents the Tribunal's original award to the Bikinians of \$563,315,500 less the two payments totaling \$2,279,180), plus interest as required by law. The total with interest on the filing date of April 11, 2005, is approximately \$724,560,902. This complaint was amended on July 18, 2006.

[April 2006 Bikinian vs. U.S. Lawsuit Information](#)

At this time the people of Bikini remain scattered throughout the Marshall Islands and the world as they wait for the cleanup of Bikini to begin in earnest, mostly due to the fact that the money they have received from the U.S. government is not adequate to fund a full radiological cleanup of the entire atoll.

Documents taken from <http://www.bikiniatoll.com/>