



A survivor's warning on nuclear contamination

LIJON EKNILANG (at left) wants the nuclear arms race to cease and the world to learn from the legacy of terrible health problems which have afflicted her and generations of her people since the nuclear bomb experiments inflicted on the Marshall Islands by the USA from 1946–1958. **ZOHL DE ISHTAR** reports.

It was three days before the U.S. Navy evacuated the Rongelap people and took them to nearby Kwajalein Atoll where they camped for three years while suffering early effects of the radiation

“Now we have this problem, what we call ‘jelly-fish babies’. These babies are born like jellyfish. They have no eyes. They have no heads. They have no arms. They have no legs. They do not shape like human beings at all.” – Darlene Keju-Johnson, Marshall Islands, 1984.¹

“We are only beginning to see the effects of the atmospheric testing, only the tip of the iceberg. When will we begin to suffer from the underground tests? Ten years, twenty? The government says everything is safe for a thousand years. Even if that were true, which it isn’t, what legacy do we leave the future generations?” – Marie-Therese Danielsson, French Polynesia, 1987²

“I have come to share my experience with you because I want you to see your future – what it is going to be – through me. I am living in a contaminated land, with contaminated water. But what is your future going to be if this city will fill with nuclear waste and everything? Where are your children going to live and work? How can you live in the future?” – Lijon Eknilang, Rongelap, 1984³

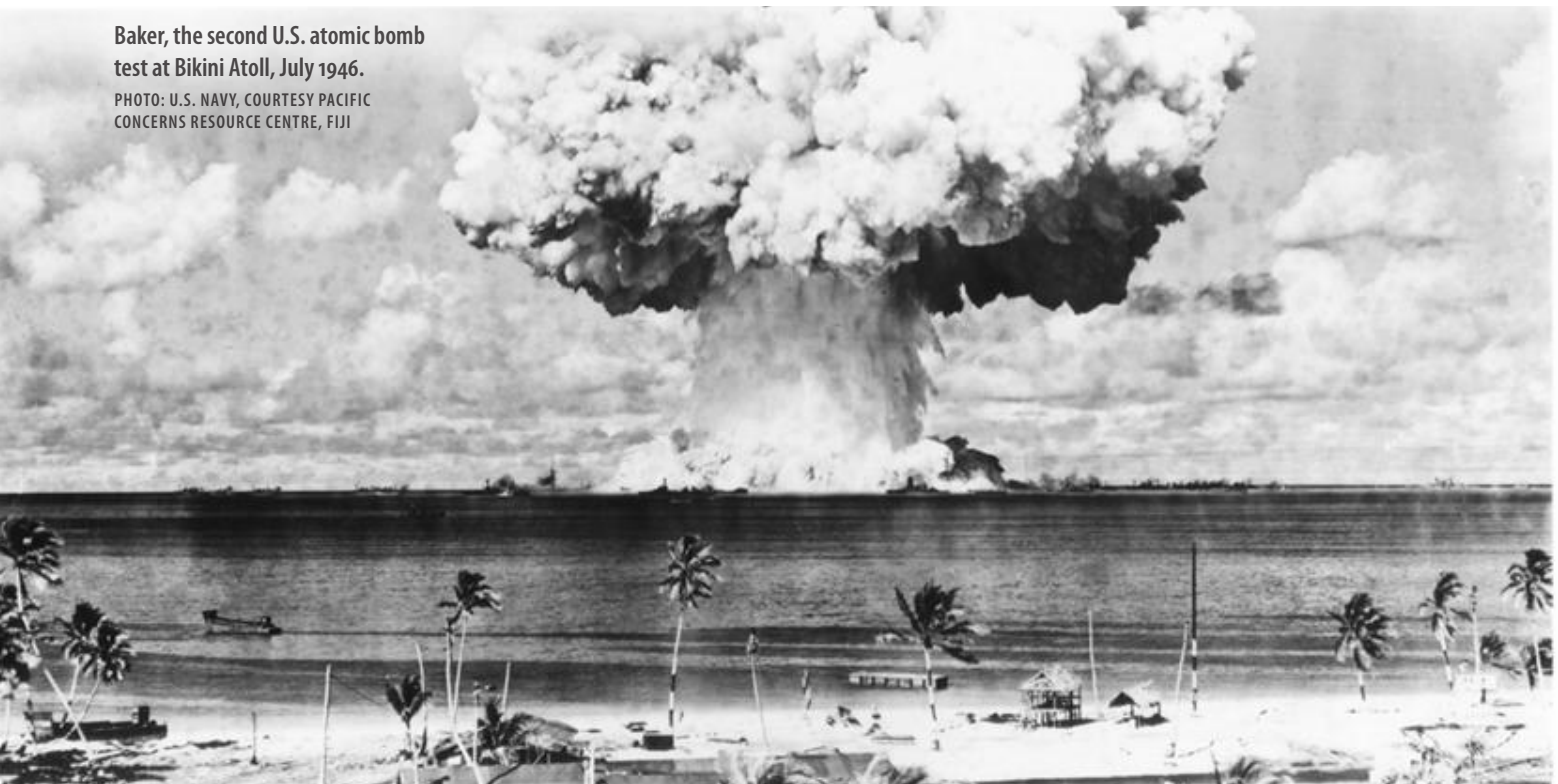
Lijon Eknilang, from Rongelap Atoll in the Marshall Islands, was one of many people contaminated by radioactive fallout when the USA tested/detonated nuclear bombs at nearby Bikini and Enewetak Atolls between - and 1958. In 1954, the USA exploded a hydrogen bomb on Bikini. Strangely code-named BRAVO, this bomb

was 1,000 times stronger than the one which devastated Hiroshima.

Pulverised, Bikini’s reef, islands and lagoon were lifted up into the air and carried as radioactive fallout over Rongelap and other inhabited islands. It was three days before the U.S. Navy evacuated the Rongelap people and took them to nearby Kwajalein Atoll where they camped for three years while suffering the early effects of the

Baker, the second U.S. atomic bomb test at Bikini Atoll, July 1946.

PHOTO: U.S. NAVY, COURTESY PACIFIC CONCERNS RESOURCE CENTRE, FIJI



radiation that had contaminated them. Their symptoms were similar to those experienced by Japanese people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, until then, the only time in history when nuclear bombs were used against civilian populations in a deliberate act of war.

We may well wonder, decades later, in 2006/07, how this nuclear experiment could ever have happened to people here on Pacific Islands, not in war-time, but in a time of peace. Sixty years after the nuclear bombing of Bikini Island, the stark reality of the nuclear experiments as experienced in Lijon Eknilang's country, were made painfully clear at the Tenth International Women and Health Meeting held in Delhi in September 2005. Here is Lijon's statement:

Lijon's statement to women & health meeting 2005

“Madame Chair and distinguished members of this conference. On behalf of my organization, Women United Together in the Marshall Islands (WUTMI), I wish upon you iokwe, and I extend our Kommel tata for inviting us to this conference. My name is Lijon Eknilang, a nuclear survivor who had seven miscarriages related to radiation. I am deeply honoured for this opportunity to speak on the impact of the nuclear arms race on women in my country, Republic of the Marshall Islands.

Including my involvement with WUTMI, I am also a member of another NGO called ERUB. ERUB stands for these four atolls, Enewetak, Rongelap, Utrik, and Bikini, and was organized to represent the voice of the nuclear victims and survivors from these atolls. The word “erub” is a Marshallese word that means ‘broken.’ The very foundation of our livelihood, cultural and social relationships, was broken into many pieces – hard to solidify to this very day.

A few months ago, my older sister Chiyoko Tamayose, another nuclear survivor went to Washington D.C. Our organization, ERUB sent Chiyoko, hoping she would get a chance to speak on our behalf in the hearing for the Changed Circumstances Petition. Unfortunately Chiyoko was never given a chance to tell her story and her trip was wasted. I believe it is important I share her story with you.

Chiyoko is 68 year old and has 12 children. Four of her children are physically handicapped, and we believe the effect of their unusual conditions came from their mother. For instance, one of her sons is currently 40 years old, but he only crawls like a baby. The son was born with a blister on his back and was taken to the Guam Naval hospital for treatment. He was never treated since the doctors claimed they had never seen a case like him and sent him back to the Marshalls. Another child was born with a lower body so soft as if there were no bones. Chiyoko had gone through number of thyroid surgeries to remove tumours, and she was also among those nuclear victims who were involved in a U.S. study of human exposure to radiation.

The U.S. government only recognized the people from

these four atolls as nuclear victims. However, we know our whole country is contaminated because more and more Marshallese from every part of our country have unusual health issues, especially our women.

Tests equal to 7,000 Hiroshima bombs

July 1st of this year [2005] marked the fifty-ninth year from the time Bikini and Enewetak atolls were used for the U.S. Nuclear Testing Program. The U.S. tested a total of 67 nuclear bombs, all of which were considered atmospheric. The “Bravo” shot, a 15 megaton device detonated on 1 March 1954 at Bikini atoll, was a hydrogen bomb, the strongest and thus most well known among the 67 bombs. It is said that Bravo alone was equivalent to 1,000 Hiroshima bombs and the rest of the tests to be equal to 7,000 Hiroshima bombs. Next year [2006] will be the 60th anniversary of such a legacy, a legacy of cancerous diseases, continuous state of poor health, alienation from our land – the glue that held our people together.

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) negotiated its political relationship with the United States in the Compact of Free Association (the Compact) with no clear understanding of how damaging the nuclear tests were and are particularly for the future of the people. A 1994 report of the U.S. National Cancer Institute, recently released, states the following in its conclusion:

‘Doses to the thyroid, colon, and stomach of persons on Rongelap, Alinginae, and (to a lesser extent) Utrik at the time of the BRAVO test in 1954 were extremely high. Based on this analysis, a high proportion of cancers of those organs that develop among members of those population groups are likely to be radiation-related. About 40% of the thyroid cancers and more than one-half of cancers to other organs (at all atolls) are yet to develop or to be diagnosed. Hence, most of the radiation excess is projected to occur in the coming years. The exception is radiation-related leukemia which is unlikely to develop in the future.’⁴

It took more than forty-one years for the U.S. government to finally admit their nuclear testing programs affected the lives of our people. A Section 177 of the Compact [between the Marshall Islands and the USA] was established to address damages experienced by the people and their land from the Testing Program.

We know our whole country is contaminated because more and more Marshallese from every part of our country have unusual health issues, especially our women



Rongelap girl, 28 days after the Bravo test on Bikini Atoll.
PACIFIC CONCERNS RESOURCE CENTRE



Tanira Jorju of Rongelap holds her grandson, Kimo, born to parents who were children at the time of Bravo fallout in 1954. She blames Kimo's retardation on the bomb.
DENNIS O'ROURKE/NUCLEAR PLAYGROUND

get affected by the 36 cancerous diseases, the book claims the most common and leading four cancers in women [are] the cervical, breast, lung, and urinary tract. Although cervical cancer leads the other three, it is excluded from compensation eligibility. It is not considered radiation-related by the U.S. government.

Our government could never argue with the U.S. government for the inclusion of cervical cancer because we had lack of evidence in the past. However, according to the 'Cancer in the Pacific' research, the number of Marshallese females found with cervical cancer exceeded all the rest of the neighbouring Micronesian countries. Would the U.S. government consider cervical cancer radiation related and include it as the 37th eligible cancerous diseases?

The \$150 million plus [compensation] is practically

A Nuclear Claims Tribunal was thus established in RMI accordingly.

The Tribunal identified 36 cancerous diseases as effects of the Testing Program. The Tribunal heard claims and issued compensations based on the Compact, authorizing US\$150 million principal and earnings over the last 15 years. But not all awards have been fully compensated. How can one value the life of a person and his/her homeland? Many people died without benefiting from such compensations. The victims being compensated are those who were born during the testing period, 1946–1958. We have many other cancer victims who were born after 1958. All of these victims have been declined from receiving any compensation.

A study called 'Cancer in the Pacific,' is the most updated research and data collection yet available. It was carried out by medical students from the John A. Burn School of Medicine, at the University of Hawaii. This book was released in September 2004.⁵

According to 'Cancer in the Pacific,' cancer is a leading cause of death in the Marshall Islands, and the number of Marshallese females with cancer exceeded males. While many Marshallese females have died and still continue to

exhausted, and awards are yet to be made for land damages. The future of the Nuclear Claims Tribunal is also questionable. As mentioned earlier, the U.S. government only recognized the people of the four atolls as the nuclear victims, and the funds were aimed to accommodate them. However, more and more Marshallese from all over our country are affected with these same 36 cancerous diseases (plus cervical cancer) – affecting mostly our women.

Another radiation report known as BEIR IV was recently released from the National Academy of Science.⁶ According to this report, 40% of Marshallese women are more likely to die from radiation cancers, and 50% more are likely to have radiation tumours than men. While we find this report shocking, we are more shocked and heart broken because the same report claims the risks for our children are even greater. We have cases of children with physical handicaps and deformed shapes born by mothers who are victims from the four atolls, and from throughout the Republic of the Marshall Islands as well.

We know that mothers need to be healthy in order to produce healthy children. This is a difficult situation for my sister Chiyoko, myself, and many other Marshallese female nuclear victims. How can we maintain a healthy life when many of our health issues are radiation related and beyond our control? For instance, I label myself a nuclear survivor because I am still alive. Yes, I survived, but whenever I think about the seven miscarriages I have had, I feel empty. I suspect all my miscarriages were radiation related because several of my stillborns were

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deformed, and one had only one eye. Each day, I ached with pains, and the legacy of the nuclear testings will continue to haunt me, and all the other survivor victims in the Marshall Islands.

I hope I have painted a picture of the overwhelming impact of the Nuclear Arms Race on your sisters in the Marshall Islands. We cannot change the past. But, with joint efforts and highly fueled passion, we can prevent nuclear testing from happening ever again, and that our children will never have to be disabled and have their future 'broken.' If we succeed, we shall not see our women and children die from nuclear exposure – ever again. With God's grace and blessing, nothing is impossible for us to accomplish. ”

Preventing more nuclear atrocities

Lijon's statement should be taken as a warning for us all. We should hasten to take steps to ensure the Marshallese experience is never repeated. But this same atrocity against humanity has already been repeated in places like Maralinga and Monte Bello in Australia, Moruroa and Fangataufa in French Polynesia (or Te Ao Maohi), in Christmas Island in Kiribati (and many other places across the Pacific and around the world). We are far behind schedule in ensuring this planet is a safe place for its peoples. And with eight nations currently holding over 27,000 nuclear weapons, and a renewed push for the mining of uranium to feed a proliferation of nuclear power stations across the globe, the question we need to ask is: will humanity heed Lijon's warning in time?

We urgently need to abolish and outlaw nuclear weapons and all things nuclear. All aspects of the nuclear armaments and power industry should be banned – from uranium mining through nuclear waste dumping, from nuclear power stations to the closely connected nuclear weapons industry. We have been very tardy in our efforts to pull away from the “Cold War” with its menacing nuclear paraphernalia. The clock hands still remain at “two-minutes-to-Midnight!”

As Lijon has said: “Since the nuclear weapons tests, the story of the Marshallese people has been sad and painful. Allow our experience now to save others such sadness and pain later. I know first-hand what the devastating effects of nuclear weapons are over time and over long distances, and what those effects mean to innocent human beings across generations. I plead with you to do what you can, to not allow the suffering we Marshallese have experienced to be repeated in any other community in the world. While no government or other organization can restore the health of the Marshallese people or our environment, steps can be taken that will make it less likely the same kinds of horrors will be experienced again.”^{7,8}

Lijon's story stands as testimony to the sufferings of the Marshallese Islanders and is a moving appeal for justice and the redress of past wrongs. Such action is essential for a positive future for these people and for all the people of the world.

Note: *Lijon's Eknilang's statement (above) to the Tenth International Women and Health Meeting held in Delhi in September 2005, was read out by Zohl de Ishtar, as coordinator of the Pacific delegation, as last-minute visa problems prevented Lijon from attending the meeting.* ■PE

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