

## Nuclear contamination

## Pacific atolls' nuclear toll revisited

Behind the deceptive tranquillity of these islands lies a sad tale of nuclear damage and local public apathy

Grey-haired, bespectacled, hands and feet swollen, Senator Jatun Anjain is nicknamed 'modern-day Moses'. Since 1969, he has been the member of the Senate of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, representing Rongelap Island. A lone crusader for the displaced nuclear victims of Rongelap, he was one of the co-winners of the 1991 Right Livelihood Award. He is also dying of bone cancer.

As in the biblical saying "A prophet is not without honour save in his own country," Senator Anjain is hated in the Marshall Islands by the government and respected by the world at large for his yeoman service towards the victims of nuclear contamination.

On March 1, 1954 a national holiday in the Marshall Islands the first hydrogen bomb testing was carried out by the United States (US) on the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. People living in Rongelap and Utrik islands were irradiated by the white ash.

"When people saw red light on the western horizon," Anjain recalls, "they feared that another war had broken out. But very soon they saw snowflakes falling. Children played with them and even ate them up."

These 'snowflakes' were the charred debris of coral from the explosion of the hydrogen bomb at Bikini Atoll in March 1954. The authorities had not warned the people about the likelihood of such an occurrence nor, afterwards, about its potential dangers.

After the nuclear test, there was a disturbing incidence of 'mysterious' diseases. The Rongelapese did not realise that their own health was in danger.

Anjain himself got alerted to the problem when his nephew suddenly died of cancer.

Anjain strongly feels that the US used the Marshallese as guinea pigs. The Americans wanted to show the Russians that they could produce a hydrogen bomb as well.

Even today, says Anjain, there is very little information accessible to the public on the dangers of nuclear contamination.

Anjain believes that unless the government hierarchy improves, nothing will effectively change in the Marshall Islands. It will continue to be a testing ground for US missiles and the people will remain guinea pigs. In fact, the Patriot missiles used in the Iraq war by the US were tested in the Kwajalein atoll of the islands.

Until 1985, claims Anjain, the US refused to divulge any information on the negative effects of nuclear contamination of the Rongelapese. "They told us lies all the time," he says.

He realised the magnitude of the damage only after coming into contact with Giff Johnson, a well-known journalist working with **The Marshall Islands Journal** who was then with Greenpeace and the Pacific Concerns Resources Centre.

That was in 1983. According to Anjain, between 1983 and 1985, Johnson and he planned the evacuation of the Rongelap inhabitants.

### Moving out

The *Rainbow Warrior* of Greenpeace moved the islanders to a totally barren island on the west of the Kwajalein atoll. Without any assistance from the

government, they planted coconut, breadfruit and papaya on the island.

Thanks to the services of David Wehnan, a lobbyist, Anjain got clinching evidence from the US Departments of Defense and Energy to establish his case. Due to Anjain's tireless efforts, the US decided to compensate the victims.

So far, about 450 people have been compensated by the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, set up by the US under the Compact of Free Association (CPA) in 1987. A Nuclear Claims Trust Fund of US\$ 150 million has been formed.

About 3,500 claimants have submitted claims under five categories (damage to person, damage to/loss of land, death,

damage to/loss of personal property, and other claims). The number of claims amounts to about 6,000.

According to Sebastian Aloit, an American nuclear lawyer and chairman of the Tribunal, about US\$ 270 million will be needed to distribute as compensation.

This would be about four times the GDP of the Marshall Islands. Until March 1993, US\$ 45 million have been distributed. The per capita compensation amounts to about US\$ 100,000.

**Poor returns**

According to the chairman, this is double the amount a us citizen is entitled to in the event of a nuclear accident. It is highly doubtful, though, whether the Tribunal

**Islands in the sun**

Located in the Central Pacific, the Marshall Islands consists of a parallel chain of atolls called the Ratak (or sunrise) group and the Ralik (or sunset) group. The islands are isolated from the rest of the world. The nearest major cities are Honolulu and Tokyo, both 2,000 miles away.

The country comprises a total of 28 scattered atolls, representing a land area of only 181 sq. km. The atolls are spread over a vast sea expanse of almost two million sq. km.

While the land area is small, some of these atolls enclose enormous lagoons. The Kwajalein atoll lagoon, with a surface area of 2,330 sq. km., is one of the largest in the world.

The Marshall Islands has a population of 43,380. Of the total population, 66.5 per cent are on the atolls of Majuro and Kwajalein (45 per cent and 21.5 per cent respectively).

Kwajalein is used as an American military base. It is one of the most important missile testing ranges in the world. The base employs Marshallese workers who live on the nearby island of Ebeye, whose population density of 22,980 per sq. km. is recognised as one of the highest in the world. The island is often described as the 'slum of the Pacific'.

The problems of internal migration is acute. Between 1980 and 1988, the populations of Majuro and Kwajalein showed a very high

annual increase of 6.3 per cent and 4.2 per cent respectively. Provisions under the Compact of Free Association (CFA) between the United States and the Marshall Islands stipulates that Marshallese citizens can enter the us freely and work there. This is expected to somewhat ease the growing population pressure arising from out migration.

The coralline atolls of the Islands are endowed with poor-quality soils. This virtually rules out agricultural diversification without high production costs.

As an Asian Development Bank report observes, "The efficient use of the land is hampered by the traditional land tenure system that gives land rights to the highest ranked members and representatives of the lineage.

Although the land tenure system was conceived originally to provide a relatively fair distribution of land among the population and within a particular lineage, population pressure is too high to maintain such a system.'

The country has a rich potential of marine resources, particularly tuna. The fishery potential of tuna is mainly tapped by distant water fishing nations.

There are also deposits of minerals such as phosphate and manganese nodules. However, their extraction has not proven to be economically feasible.

will be able to distribute the remaining claims amounting to US\$ 225 million. This is due to the poor returns from the Trust Fund of US\$ 150 Million invested in the US.

**S**enator Anjain spurns the contentions of the Nuclear Claim Tribunal. He asserts that the people who actually lost their lives and land are not receiving any compensation.

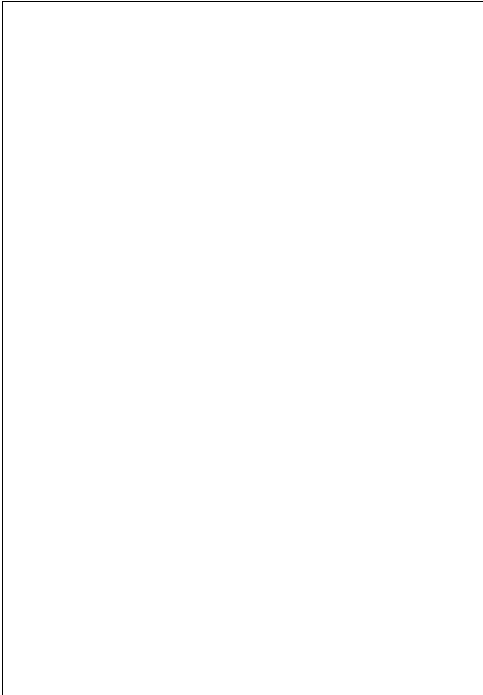
Instead, the money is flowing into the wrong hands of chiefs and members of the government.

"I am investigating the Nuclear Claims Tribunal now," says Anjain in a voice enfeebled but propped up by his angry glare. The compensation amounts intended for the victims are given to the chiefs who then distribute them.

This, explains Anjain, gives ample room for embezzlement. People do not protest since they fear losing their settlement rights. These, bylaw, are controlled by the chiefs of the islands.

Ironically, when money started flowing in as compensations, the people just forgot about Anjain's efforts. Instead, they took him to court. The islanders thought he had paid the lobbyist too much to obtain the crucial information.

Senator Anjain is still not satisfied with the official version of the magnitude of



nuclear contamination. An independent panel of scientists is now examining bone samples for traces of plutonium.

He is also highly frustrated with the public apathy. "My own people do not appreciate what I am doing," laments this winner of the alternative Nobel Prize.

Darken Keju Johnson, a daring antinuclear activist of the past, now in charge of a youth programme, agrees with many of the observations of Senator Anjain. She has her own to add.

The occurrence of jellyfish baby syndrome, she claims, is high in the Marshall Islands. So too is the incidence of cancer of the reproductive organs.

She is equally critical of the apathy of the people. "They are concerned only about how much each one can benefit from Uncle Sam, there is little national pride, there is no togetherness," she observes.

She also complains about the lack of public education on the negative aspects of nuclear contamination and is worried about the absence of any systematic study on cancer and its causal factors. Nobody even maintains a cancer registry in the Marshall Islands.

#### **Oppressive system**

To make things worse, the authoritarianism of the government, as well as the oppressive system of chiefs, complicates matters further. "What is the point in pounding your chest when people are not behind you?" queries Darleen with great resignation.

Her husband, journalist Giff Johnson the first person who warned the Marshall Islanders about threats from nuclear contamination today a disappointed man. Sarcastically, he remarks, "The perception of the Marshall Islanders is that they are happy about being the victims of nuclear contamination."

The state of affairs was not so dismal before big money started flowing in. In 1956, for example, a concerned Marshallese went to the UN to complain about the US nuclear tests. In the late 1960s and 1970s, people in Kwajalein protested against the military base and the ordeal of

## ***Matrilineal power***

Marshallese society is fundamentally matrilineal. Each person's identity in society is defined not just through land rights, but through a matrilineage or bwij and a matriclan or jowi. The matriclan is a grouping of lineages headed by an alap, normally the oldest male representing his community.

Two kinds of bwij exist: the 'upper' class representing the royalty and the nobility, and the 'lower' class of commoners. These rights are held in common by all members of a bwij, never by a single person as a private holding.

The history of the Marshall Islands is characterized by different periods of colonization. It was during these phases that this complex social structure evolved as a response to changes in land value.

In recent times, however, though the traditional system of land tenure still operates, it no longer offers security to individuals in the society. In fact, out-island migration has led to an increasing shortage of land. This is today a

medical testing by US scientists. Slowly, from the 1960s, the compensation money started trickling in.

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The trickle became millions in the 1980s. That was when things started going wrong.

According to Johnson, "Once the compensation went up, the issue got internalised, and it became a matter of who gets how much. Money has, therefore, become the bottom line."

Ironically, from the monetary point of view, the Marshallese had to pay an unimaginably heavy price for signing the Compact of Free Association with the US. Against US\$150 million in trust fund, they had to relinquish all their claims against nuclear contamination. Significantly,

when the CFA came into effect from 1986, US\$5 billion worth of law suits were pending in US courts.

The story of nuclear contamination in the Marshall Islands has a sorry side to it. The lure of compensation has brushed aside larger issues of health and environment in a nation of islands whose ecological processes are extremely vulnerable. ■

This article has been prepared by the South Pacific Mission of ICSF