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U.S. Admits Atomic Blast Mistake in Marshall Islands

By George Raine
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Through an unfortunate series of events and miscalculations, the United States on March 1, 1954 made a thermonuclear mistake in the Marshall Islands that caused years of suffering, is blamed for taking lives and may take more in years to come.

The government paid. It may pay much more in the future. The incident was the detonation of a 17-megaton device which spewed radioactive fallout over the atolls and natives of Ailingnae, Rongelap and Ujae.

and resentment continues, say persons who know this story well. The sad fact, these persons say, is that the victims still don't understand radiation. They call it poison and they say the poison is costing them their lives.

Represents Precedent

The United States has funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars into this island chain of food-gathering peoples and new legislation has piled loose \$25,000 for each person affected by radiation and \$100,000 in death benefits for heirs of those who may die as a result of the radiation. There has been one death, generally ascribed to the radiation.

This compensation is important in the fallout of suffering, displacement

part because, some say, it represents a precedent for the United States to compensate a growing number of ex-soldiers, or in many cases their widows, alleging that radiation from Nevada Test Site detonations in the 1950s induced in the men leukemia or other cancers.

Plaintiffs in a number of federal court cases say this and the U.S. House of Representatives health and environment subcommittee is now conducting a lengthy series of hearings on U.S. nuclear testing and the cause-and-effect relationship, if proven, between low-dose ionizing radiation and cancer.

The court action and the House interest came in the wake of the widely

publicized story of Paul R. Cooper, who said from his Veterans Administration Hospital bed here in early 1977 that his acute myelogenous leukemia was caused by his participation, through wargames, in a 1957 Nevada blast called Smoky.

Five other men who were there have died and two more are terminal leukemia victims. And claims from other Nevada and Pacific Ocean detonations read nearly identical to Paul Cooper's.

Died Feb. 8

Mr. Cooper died Feb. 8 at VA Hospital in Boise. Many months ago, a University of Utah physician in family medicine, Dr.

Konrad P. Kotrady, began to follow Cooper story attentively. He saw parallels between the plight of the Marshallese people. But that does not extend to the area of compensation.

Between June, 1975, and September, 1976, he served as resident physician in the islands for the Brookhaven National Laboratory, which is based in Upton, N.Y.

Underscoring what Dr. Kotrady believes is a Los Angeles attorney, Ronald G. Bakal. He represented island natives in their bid for congressional compensation for cancer, birth defects and deaths caused by radiation exposure.

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from the 1954 detonation.

Currently, Mr. Bakal is representing the widow of an ex-Marine who died of lymphosarcoma last October. Charles A. Broudy had been exposed to radioactive debris on a ship that had been in the vicinity of Bikini Atoll when a nuclear device was detonated in 1948. He also witnessed three Nevada blasts in 1957.

Sources on the House health and environment subcommittee expect that United States nuclear testing in the Pacific Ocean will be scrutinized along with the Nevada series. If so, the story of the 1954 Marshall Islands accident will be fleshed out.

Radiation from the incident is blamed for the high rate of both benign and malignant thyroid tumors developed in the natives, the bulk of it materializing some 22 years after the fact. The U.S. admits this.

Event Recalled

This is what happened.

The thermonuclear device, Bravo, was detonated from a tower at Bikini. At 17 megatons, this was considerably more yield than had been expected. Somehow, authorities thought the yield would be from five to seven megatons.

Then, an unpredicted shift in the winds in the upper atmosphere caused the radioactive cloud to drift over and deposit fallout on the inhabited atolls to the east: Rongelap with 84 people, Ailingnae with 18 people, Rongerik with 28 American servicemen and Utrik with 157 people.

A Japanese fishing boat in the area, the Lucky Dragon, with 23 fishermen aboard, was also exposed, a fact which received widespread news coverage.

This region, Micronesia, is a U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. It is just north of the equator, east of the Caroline Islands and northwest of the Gilbert Islands, about halfway between the Hawaiian Islands and Australia.

The Marshall Islands were chosen as an atomic bomb proving ground first in 1946 and numerous tests were conducted at both Bikini and Eniwetok until a moratorium was declared in 1968.

It was four years too late in the minds of the Marshallese.

Actually, adverse health effects did not show themselves for some years. With one exception. One of the fishermen on the Lucky Dragon died six months after the explosion, a victim of radiation burns.

That fact was widely reported and, despite the fact that the United States began to pump health services and health care dollars into the islands, the island peoples were still largely forgotten, said Dr. Kotrady, the former Brookhaven physician.

AEC Ordered Exams

The exposed islanders were first examined after the blast by order of the Atomic Energy Commission. Navy doctors, in the majority, did the health surveys, focusing on radiation effects. In 1966 they were turned over to the Brookhaven National Laboratory. Since then they have been conducted in conjunction with the Department of Health Services of the Trust Territory, armed services medical specialists and personnel from various U.S. medical centers.

Interestingly, while this monitoring has been going on for years, aimed at the native peoples, no medical follow-up was made on the 28 American servicemen stationed on Rongerik and exposed, said Dr. Kotrady. He said that to his knowledge the U.S. doesn't know where they are now.

Another parallel, he said, is the lack of medical follow-up on the servicemen assigned to the Nevada testing.

In 1963, medical interest in the islands took on new momentum with the appearance of growth retardation in some children and some thyroid abnormalities — now developing as benign and malignant thyroid tumors.

Then, in 1972, a 19-year-old Rongelap youth exposed in 1954 developed a fatal case of acute myelogenous leukemia. That is the same disease

diagnosed in Paul Cooper in February, 1976, two years prior to his death.

There had been earlier cases of radiation burns, loss of hair, diarrhea and depressed blood counts among the island people but no one died from these initial problems, said Dr. Kotrady.

There was also an increase of miscarriages and stillbirths among exposed women during the first five years after the explosion, but blame for this has been put as much on general health and disease incidence as on radiation exposure.

Because there is a lack of concrete answers to critical health questions, Dr. Kotrady argues that the scope of U.S. involvement in the islands ought to be broadened to include general health care. The government is still preoccupied with what Dr. Kotrady judges to be an ordained set of health problems believed stemming from radiation.

Need Screening

If genetic dilemmas develop in the future — a worry that preoccupies the island people — born of the 1954 exposure, screening ought to be going on now, says Dr. Kotrady.

It was with this issue that the physician and Brookhaven parted company. Dr. Kotrady said Brookhaven has felt that certain problems are to be expected from the radiation and did not see the merit in mounting a general medical program to determine what crises, if any, may occur in the future.

When the people of Rongelap talk about the accident, the doctor said, they describe it as a mist or snow. They say they could see their footprints in the fallout deposit.

"For the people, there is great psychological and sociological effect. They lost their abilities to conduct their native way of life, depending on U.S. handouts. Their word for radiation is poison and they have seen how the poison affects their bodies and they are afraid of what it may do to them and their children in the future.

Don't Understand

"They don't clearly understand radiation. But they've been sick from radiation and they've seen at least one child die, and they've seen one-third or more of the people taken to the United States and have surgery performed on their necks. They know something's going on and don't really know what the future holds for them or their children," said Dr. Kotrady.

As a result, he said, is a growing distrust for American doctors. They fear they are not being told the truth and they are beginning to request that Japanese doctors attend them.

The parallels between the Marshall Islands incident, which is viewed by the United States as a thermonuclear accident, and the conduct of testing in the Nevada desert are somewhat uneven.

For one thing, the radiation doses were probably much higher in the islands. Radiation burns were much more common with the island people than with soldiers in the Nevada desert for nuclear warfare training maneuvers.

Too, it may be that the United States will not be found liable in exposing troops, like Paul Cooper and others, to low-level ionizing radiation that allegedly induced delayed leukemias in fighting men.

Nonetheless, Dr. Kotrady sees an inequality in government thinking, as he worked for an organization funded to monitor health for radiation victims, and lobbied for recent legislation that is putting large sums of money in the pockets of victims and their families. . . . this in the face of U.S. denials of claims by the ex-soldiers who have cancers and are turning up in a larger than expected incidence rate.

But recently, through congressional pressure and the pressure applied by the late Paul Cooper, the National Research Council's Medical Follow-up Agency has planned an extensive study of men assigned to the Nevada testing. That does not mean there will be compensation, however.

Meanwhile, Dr. Kotrady is aligning himself with those who maintain the United States erred in Nevada, just as it did, and admits it did, at the Bikini Atoll.