

3 Bikini exiles tell tale of woe, prepare case

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What would three exiled Bikini residents tell the man who made them leave their home 29 years ago to make way for 23 U.S. nuclear explosions on that Marshall Island atoll?

If somehow that man was in the very same room, what would they say?

"We would tell him how sorry we are for all the difficulties and the hardships the people of Bikini have encountered," said Henchi Balos in calm, sure tones.

"We would tell him about the damages to our islands.

"THEN, BECAUSE WE'RE poor, because we cannot help ourselves, we would ask for the help of the U.S."

Balos is one of four Bikini residents in Honolulu to testify in behalf of their class action suit filed against several Federal agencies last Thursday.

The suit, which claims the agencies have violated the agreement under which the U.S. administers the Trust Territories, is the first major legal action against the U.S. by the Bikini residents.

They left their atoll in 1946 after the U.S. picked the islands as the site of nuclear tests which continued until 1958.

In the meantime, Bikini residents were relocated to Rongerik where some of them starved, then Kwajelein where they lived in tents and finally Kili Island, where most of the Bikini community of 860 lives.

BALOS, NATHAN NOTE AND Lore Kessibuki, three of the named plaintiffs in the suit in behalf of the Bikini community, gave their views on their exile and the court action during an interview yesterday at the Ala Moana Hotel. The fourth named plaintiff, Tomaki Juda, was ill and couldn't attend.

The three spoke in Marshallese. The translator was by Reuben Zackras, a counselor with the Micronesian Legal Aid Corporation on the Marshall Island of Majuro.

Despite the hardships that resulted with relocation over the past 29 years, the three said they would not show the man responsible for their exile scorn, anger or resentment.

Asked whether they would request or demand assistance, Balos said:

"We are not bitter toward the U.S. We are not against the U.S.

"BUT I THINK AT THIS POINT in time we have the right to ask for assistance."

Kessibuki, the magistrate and leader of the Bikini community, said the residents had no choice but to leave once the atoll was picked for the tests.

"We couldn't say 'no,'" he said. "It was the end of the war. We were in fear. When the Americans came, they said, 'I'm superior here in the Pacific. You cannot say no.'"

The residents, numbering 165 at the time, were relocated to Rongerik atoll, about a quarter of the size of Bikini.

"We first realized the U.S. Government was not going to keep its promise of providing for our needs when the big starvation hit," said Note.

"People had to eat spoiled coconuts which drifted in from other islands. If you found that coconut on shore, you would hide it from other people," he said.

"MY GRANDMOTHER DIED BECAUSE of this starvation."

Although conditions at Kili were better, Note explained some of the hardships.

"There are no small islands where we live," he said. "We used to go down to the small islands and gather food. We no longer enjoy that.

"We have some seasons when the surf is terrible. It is impossible to land, load and unload things.

"The island doesn't have a lagoon. Our grown up kids don't know how to sail, a custom of Marshall Island people."



Advertiser photo by Charles O.

Three exiled Bikini residents, (left to right) Henchi Balos, Lore Kessi and Nathan Note, look at a study of radioactivity at Eniwetok Islet

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HE SAID THEY SUFFER FROM a lack of adequate schools and medical facilities.

The three said their law suit was prompted last August by a recent Energy Research and Development Administration report which said the island was still contaminated by radioactivity.

Earlier reports gave the islands a clean bill and about 75 residents are back on the atoll.

"We realized they (Federal agencies) weren't really telling us the truth. Then we filed the law suit," said Note.

The suit asks for, among other things, temporary relocation of the 75 residents, a more thorough study of the risks of radiation and immediate medical examinations for the 75.

What do the three hope for the atoll in the future?

"IT SHOULD BE LIKE BEFORE we left," said Balos, who was one year old in 1946. "When we return, it should be like the other atolls in the Pacific."

Note said, "We understand the U.S. will not accommodate all our desires for rebuilding the Bikini we want.

"We know whatever they give us is what we're going to get."

Kessibuki, at 65 the oldest of the three, said, "The real Bikini is gone.

"Four small islands are completely gone. Some of the other islands we used to harvest taro roots are only reef and coral — no soil on them.

"Even though all involved will try their best to rebuild Bikini, it won't be the same place as it was before."