

Islanders show unnatural, hideous effects

and shell-fish are no longer edible, coconut trees are mutant, and fruit and vegetables are half-rotted and deformed.

This destruction of Marshallese resources has reduced the once self-sufficient islands to total US dependency.

The area's only source of income is from Kwajalein military base, located on an island restricted to people who once lived there.

The base functions around the world's largest lagoon, used as a target range for ICBM's shot from a California base. The MX missile was tested there in June, and the new Trident nuclear submarines are expected to shoot missiles into the lagoon later this year.

For Keju, growing up near Kwajalein base brought frightening reminders of the weapons poised over the world.

A red flag on Ebeye's pier often warns people away from the lagoon and recalls fishermen from the bay, she says.

"It means a missile is coming soon, but we never know when. Just recently, I learned where the missiles come from, but most people don't know."

"Sometimes, some parts of the missiles land on other islands. The next day, officers come with gloves and pick them up. And the people ask 'What's going on?' and they say 'Oh, nothing.' But if it's nothing, why are they covered up?" asks Keju.

The military base has forced Kwajalein landowners to live on Keju's tiny home, disease infested Ebeye. Of the 8000 people, only some are lucky enough to find work on the Kwajalein base as janitors, messengers, maids, or gardeners.

The wages are low, says Keju, and the Marshallese are denied access to the first class hospital, good schools, and numerous recreation facilities available on Kwajalein.

"We're treated as second class citizens on our own islands."

But an official at the US consulate in Vancouver said the Kwajalein military base has benefitted many Marshallese.

"Military bases bring economic progress to

an area because they provide civilian jobs for the local community," he said. "But where there are military bases there are inevitable frictions with the local population and charges of unfair treatment," said the consulate employee, who refused to give his name.

Like most military bases, the Marshall Islands base was chose for its strategic location. The Islands are key stepping stones to the Phillipines and the mainland of Asia, countries allied economically to the US.

"The Marshall Island's freedom has to be defended," said the official.

The islands also fill climatic and geographic requirements for nuclear testing, he said. "Obviously, the Marshall Islands were chosen because of the fact that they were the most distant part of the world from any concentrated populated area."

This criteria can also be applied to dumping grounds for radio-active waste.

On the restricted island of Runit, radio-active materials have been bull-dozed onto one end of the islane and covered with a concrete dome.

A 1975 report from the US Nuclear Defense Agency says minute amounts of lethal plutonium will be released through the dome.

"These, however, will be small and insignificant compared to the amounts already in the lagoon," the report states.

Provisions for future storage of nuclear waste have been made, said the consulate official. Cannisters of radio-active material will be lowered onto the ocean floor in the latest disposal plan, he said.

The US is not the only country to use the Marshall Islands as a nuclear dumping ground. Japan recently signed an agreement with the US allowing waste from Japaneses nuclear reactors to be deposited near the islands.

Local feelins about these developments are

expressed by a button pinned to Keju's blous.

"If it's safe, Dump it in Tokyo, Test it in Paris, Store it in Washington, but keep my Pacific Nuclear Free."

Nuclear tests have also been conducted in other Pacific communities, and an expanding nuclear free Pacific movement is finally linking communities with similiar experiences.

Last summer, support from the nuclear free Pacific movement led Kwajalein landowners to occupy 11 of their former islands in Kwajalein atoll.

The protest, called Operation Homecoming, attracted more than 1000 islanders for a peaceful four month occupation.

Half-forgotten traditions re-emerged during the protests as people fished for food, wove baskets, and cooked together, said Keju.

"The people were glad to be on their islands and felt a sense of freedom and peace. Kids really learned about their culture for the first time."

The non-violent protest disrupted missile testing and forced the Pentagon to negotiate a new, but temporary, lease agreement for the islands. It provided greater compensation for victims alive during the tests and allocated funds for improving conditions on Ebeye and other islands.

"We want to be able to control our own affairs and make decisions about our lives rather than have dishonest people do it," Keju says about the protests.

"We don't want our islands to be used to kill other people. The bottom line is that we want to live in peace."

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