

Nuclear testing has irreversible effects

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by Sarah Cox

"The natives are delighted, enthusiastic about the atomic bomb, which has already brought them prosperity and a new promising future."
— U.S. navy press statement, April, 1946

Friendly people and lush coconut trees greeted the first U.S. military ship to arrive on the tropical island of Bikini in 1946.

The Marshall Islands' military governor stepped onto Bikini's beach and summoned the native people to gather around him.

Bikini atoll has been chosen for the first series of U.S. nuclear bomb test in the Pacific, he told the curious people.

Scientists are experimenting with nuclear bombs " ... for the good of mankind and to end all wars," said the governor. Turning to the Bikini chief, he said the 167 islanders must be moved immediately. He assured them they would return after two atomic tests—the first nuclear explosions since the atomic bomb had been dropped on Nagasaki one year earlier.

Darlene Keju was only three years old when Operation Crossroads blasted the Marshall Islands into the nuclear age. The islanders watched in awe as blinding light and mushroom clouds shattered the tranquility of their small communities.

Only dots on the world map, the Marshall Islands consist of 30 atolls—tiny coral islands encircling a lagoon. They are a federated state of Micronesia with a population of 30,000.

Keju came from the islands to tell the World Council of Churches' sixth assembly at the University of British Columbia, this August, about the 37 years since Operation Crossroads.

She grew up on one of the northern islands, downwind of Bikini. For her, the word "cancer" is not just a nagging possibility; it is something Marshallese have learned to accept.

"We know we're dying out," she says. "There's no cure for these radiation problems."

Keju's deep brown eyes stare through a window at UBC's spacious campus—an ocean of area for someone who has spent most of her life on a crowded 66 acre island.

"Today, I have three tumours in my body—one was taken out recently," she says. "I don't know what causes them, but like many Marshallese I am afraid for the future."

Her soft stare lifts the veil which shrouds the Marshall Islands.

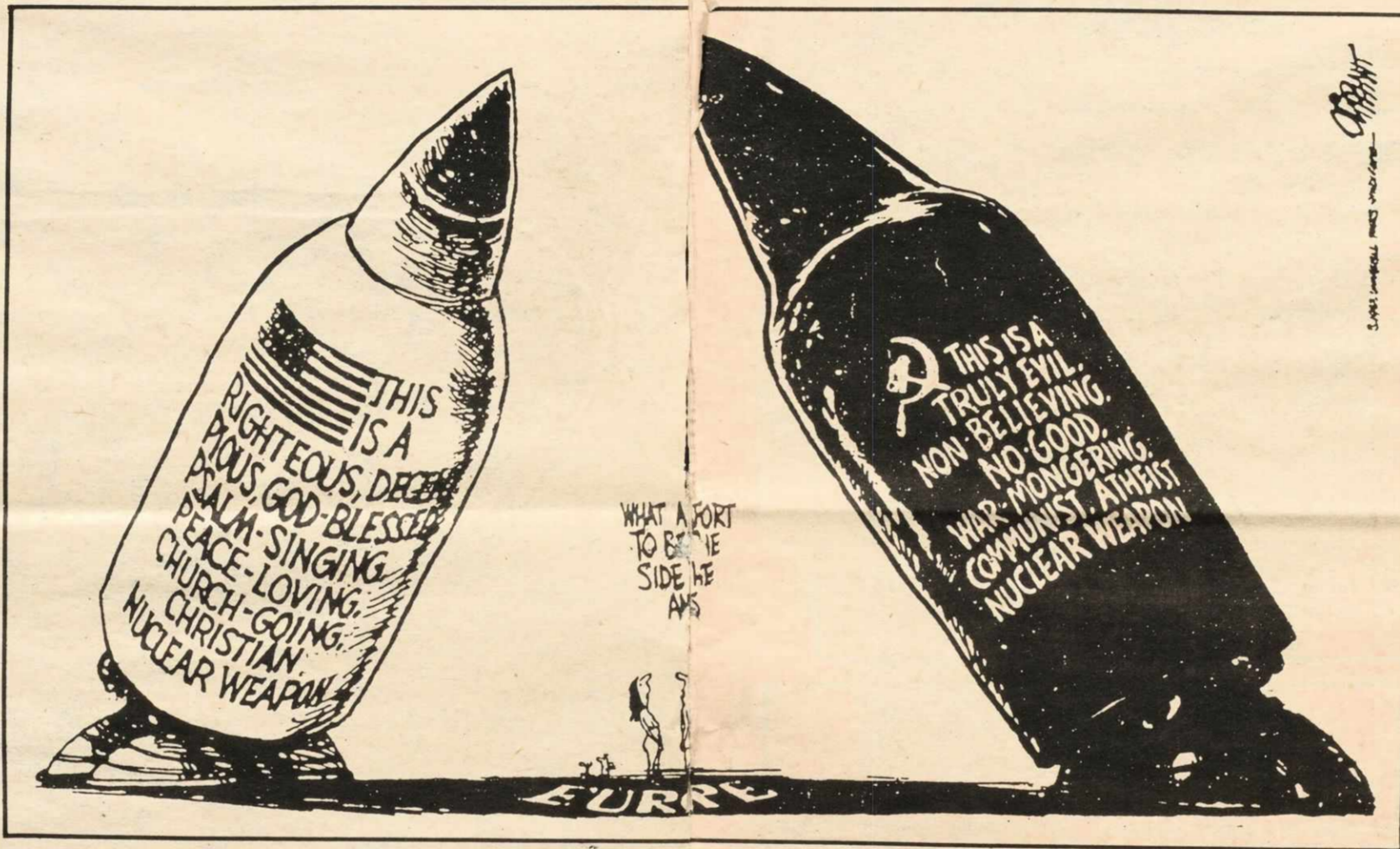
After Operation Crossroads, 66 more atomic and hydrogen explosions ripped through the tiny coral islands. Six islands were vaporized and many more, including Bikini, were so contaminated with radioactive fallout they were declared uninhabitable.

U.S. military vessels steaming into lagoons became a common sight, giving notice of impending danger from nuclear tests. Unable to object, the islanders would be shipped to another location with promises of return.

"They didn't even tell them when they would be moved," says Keju. "They felt like they were being treated like animals."

The Bikinians were moved a second time in 1947, after limited resources on their temporary home caused widespread malnutrition.

The U.S. is supposed to protect the Marshallese, Keju says, referring to a



United Nations mandate to develop the islands toward self-sufficiency and to "protect the inhabitants against the loss of their land and resources."

"But our response is 'protect us from whom? We do not have any enemies. There is no word in Marshallese language for enemy.'"

Before the years of mushroom clouds and ash-like fallout, the Marshallese also did not have words for thyroid cancer, leukemia, cataracts, or for the hideously deformed babies which later came to be known as "jellyfish".

More of these babies are born every year, says Keju.

"The baby is born on the labour table, and it breathes and moves up and down, but it is not shaped like a human being. It is colourful and looks like a bag of jelly. These babies only live a few hours."

"Sometimes, babies are born with growths like horns on their heads, while others have six fingers or toes," Keju says.

The U.S. sends scientists and doctors to examine the Marshallese, Keju says, but the medical treatment is inadequate and people often feel they're only being used for experiments.

"They come and look at us as if we

were guinea-pigs they never sit down with us and talk about what is wrong, or give us personal records. And Marshallese are regularly shipped off to Honolulu, Cleveland, New York and elsewhere for surgery with no explanation whiver."

Reports from laboratory studies of Bikini and other contaminated areas indicate the islanders viewed as excellent sources fories.

"The habitat these people on the islands will afford valuable ecological radiation data human beings," said a report from Brookhaven National Laboratory.

Twelve years nuclear testing have slowly poisoned the food chain, says Keju. Some fish shell-fish are no longer edible, cut trees are mutant, and fruit and vegetables are half-rotten and deformed.

This destruction of Marshallese resources has reduced the once-sufficient island to total U.S. dependency.

The area's 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, is a target range for

Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles 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 is 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-infected Ebeye. Of the 8,000 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 recreational facilities on Kwajalein.

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

But an official at the U.S. 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 chosen for its strategic location. The islands are key stepping stones to the Philippines and the mainland of Asia, countries economically allied to the U.S.

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

The islanders also fill climatic and geographic requirements for nuclear testing, he said. "Obviously, the Islands were chosen because of the fact that it was 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, radioactive materials have been bulldozed onto one end of the island and covered with a mammoth concrete dome.

A 1975 report from the U.S. 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. Cansisters of radio-active material will be lowered onto the ocean floor in the latest disposal plan, he said.

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

Local feelings about these developments are expressed by a button pinned to Keju's blouse.

"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 similar 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 1,000 islanders for a peaceful four month occupation.

Half-forgotten traditions re-emerged during the protest 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."

