Our Shared Nuclear Legacy: U.S. Nuclear Testing in the Marshall Islands

In 1946, the U.S. military selected Bikini Atoll as the site of future U.S. nuclear testing. In January 1946, the White House approved and ordered ships to Bikini. Commodore Ben Wyatt “asked” the 167 residents to leave their ancestral lands for “the good of all mankind.” With Juda’s response, “everything is in god’s hands,” Bikinian removal took place in March 1946. Navy film crews were on the island to record Bikinian compliance and removal, which was broadcast around the world. Months following their relocation to Rongerick, the Bikini people were starving and asked to return to their homelands.

On March 1, 1954, the United States detonated its largest nuclear bomb, Castle Bravo. At 15 megatons, it was 1,000 times the force of the Hiroshima bomb and first two tests at Bikini. The force of the blast vaporized three islands. The crushed coral, plant and marine life, were uplifted into the atmosphere and rained down as fallout on inhabited atolls. The U.S. government recognizes 4 atolls as having received significant fallout from all tests in the Compact of Free Association, but U.S. documents show (above and left) that more atolls were exposed to high levels of radiation by Bravo and other tests than has been publicly admitted.

Table from “Radiative Dose from Operation Castle,” a document declassified by the Clinton Administration. RMI embassy. Nuclear Documents Collection.

Today, Marshallese people speak out about the ongoing consequences of nuclear testing – on their health, lands, and culture – in the Marshall Islands, the United States, and throughout Oceania.