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Farewell Rongelap

Three-page special

This week marks the 20th anniversary of the Rongelap people's evacuation to Mejjatto Island in Kwajalein Atoll. Unlike their evacuation by the US military after the Bravo hydrogen bomb test dumped snow-like fallout on their islands in 1954, the islanders themselves decided to leave Rongelap in May 1985 — fearing continued radiation exposure from a contaminated environment.



By SUZANNE MURPHY

It's been 20 years since the people of Rongelap independently uprooted themselves and moved to Mejjatto Island on Kwajalein Atoll and this week 64-year-old Lemeyo Abon looked back at the decision that her community made and doesn't regret it.

"It was a difficult decision," said Abon, "but we knew it was the only safe option for us."

Between the years after the Bravo bomb test in 1954 and the final decision to move in 1985, Abon, like so many in the community, continued to live and eat off the land not knowing the facts or the full affects of the nuclear fallout on her home atoll.

At the time, the US continued to down play the affects of the nuclear fallout, with US Ambassador to the United Nations Harvey Feldman stating that "Rongelap was no more dangerous than Washington DC — and that locally grown food consumption would receive less radiation than residents of Denver Colorado."

Without any scientific data to prove the island was contaminated, save the fact that they were getting sick, the Rongelap community decided to leave their home atoll.

"Our Senator, Jeton Anjain organized a community meeting and it was during this meeting that we made the final decision to leave Rongelap.

"We thought if we moved from our land the US would finally consider our plight.

“It was a gamble with our lives. But we knew we were contaminated. Our main concern was the safety of our children and grandchildren. So many people were getting sick. All we wanted was for the US to clean our island.”

Remembering back to the day her people started to move from Rongelap to Mejjatto, Abon recalls doing everything she could to stall.

“My plan was to be on the last trip, I wanted to stay on Rongelap for as long as I could. Those last few days I kept walking around the island just trying to absorb the island as much as I could,” she said.

“My family and I were put on the second to last trip. As I was getting on the boat I cried and kept thinking, ‘when am I going to return’— I’m surprised it’s been 20 years, I never thought it would be this long.”

About 300 residents of Rongelap were transported to Mejjatto in Kwajalein Atoll by the Greenpeace flagship Rainbow Warrior in May 1985. Like Abon, none of them really knew when or if they would ever be able to return.

“It took a day to get to Mejjatto,” said Abon. “Although there was nothing on Mejjatto when we arrived nobody complained or even considered returning to Rongelap.”

Abon recalls a warm welcome from the people of Ebeye.

“They brought us food,” she said. “The iroij of Kwajalein really helped us, they provided us with food, and a clean island to live on.”

At the time, there was only one building structure on Mejjatto built by the Rongelap council to house the women and children during the early days of settlement.

“We didn’t stay in the house. Instead my husband and I used two sheets of plywood from our (dismantled) house for shelter until our house was rebuilt,” she said.

1985 was a dramatic year for Abon. After years of eating and living off her contaminated island Abon had developed thyroid cancer and that year not only did she feel compelled to move from her home atoll she also had to undergo surgery to remove her thyroid.

Abon has scars on her body that tell a story of the US’s nuclear legacy in the Marshall Islands, but to Abon these scars are superficial. It’s the internal scars that you don’t see that hurt her the most.

“I have nothing to leave my children,” said Abon. “Cancer is the only ‘jolet’ (souvenir) I have to pass down to my children and grandchildren.”

Today Abon is being told that she can return to Rongelap but she is skeptical.

“I miss Rongelap and I do want to return but the US hasn’t finished cleaning it up,” she said. “They only cleaned one island. I want them to clean the whole atoll. As far as I am concerned the US hasn’t met its obligation to us. It’s still not safe. They told us it was safe before and we got sick. I don’t trust them anymore. I don’t believe it’s clean.

“What’s the point of having all this compensation money when we can’t even go home?” asks Abon. “I’d rather be able to go home to a clean atoll and have no money than be in the displaced situation I am in now. Mejjatto is not our land and we’re (the Rongelap people) scattered throughout the Marshalls living on land that doesn’t belong to us. There is always the risk that landowners could tell us to move off their lands.”

‘We need to move on’ — James Matayoshi

While always remembering the past and fighting to correct past wrongs, current Rongelap Mayor James Matayoshi is planning on a brighter future for his people.

“We can’t stay wounded. We need to move on,” said Matayoshi. “We’ve taken a holistic approach of development for our return to Rongelap.

“Rongelap’s infrastructure has been built up to accommodate a community. We have a power plant, a reverse osmosis (water making) machine, the NTA cellular system is operational, the roads are paved, and we’re looking into pearl farming and tourism development to create new jobs.”

Matayoshi and his local government are creating what he calls a “stimulation plan” to kick start an economy on Rongelap.

“The power plant will need operators, as will the reverse osmosis machine. In fact,” says Matayoshi, “we’re considering manufacturing bottled water and selling it.”

Matayoshi sees many opportunities in returning to Rongelap.

“Once a community is established, we’ll need school teachers, a police force, health assistance and other service providers.”

According to Matayoshi, the local government’s development plans are being funded through use of the interest earned from Rongelap’s \$60 million trust fund. With funding like this the local government is aware that all options are possible, but what the local government wants is to ensure that the options they choose will actually establish a viable local economy.

One possibility Matayoshi says the local government is considering is to provide grants or seed money for private businesses to develop Rongelap’s economy.

All Rongelap needs now is its people and Matayoshi expects that this year the first set of homes will be completed as the rebuilding homes at the existing sites for the original families has already started.

Meanwhile new families have the option to return with assistance the USDA, which has already agreed to provide the Rongelap people with low-interest 30-year mortgages.

“The local government’s role is to facilitate and inform (the Rongelap people) of the options that are now available to them,” said Matayoshi. “Many elders want to return and what we’re doing is creating options for those who want to resettle.”

“If things fall into place, we could have the first model community in the Marshall Islands,” said Matayoshi. “We have a future to look forward to on Rongelap and I’m looking forward to seeing a community there.”

Matayoshi remembers

“Nobody expected that it would be this long,” said Rongelap Mayor James Matayoshi as he reflects back on the move of his people from Rongelap to Mejjatto.

At the time Matayoshi was a sophomore attending Marshall Islands High School and

living at Senator Jeton Anjain's house and he recalls being around the senator while the decision to evacuate the people from Rongelap weighed heavily in the air for the senator.

"He (Senator Anjain) couldn't sleep at nights," Matayoshi said as he looked back on the years.

Matayoshi remembers Anjain as a man whose fear and concern for the well being of his people caused him great anguish and desperation as he was constantly contemplating the scenario of being the one responsible for evacuating the people from Rongelap.

"Senator Anjain knew the consequence of moving his people could be a political risk for him. But he weighed the people's fears and their safety as his first priority," said Matayoshi. "We decided to move for the sake of the children."

Matayoshi description of Senator Anjain paints a picture of a man whose strength came from the support of his community.

"The national government turned us away. They said there was no money to help us move. They were basing their decision on the US department of Energy reports that claimed there was nothing for us to worry about," said Matayoshi. "It was sad that the national government didn't step up to the plate and help us out."

Even without the help of his own government Senator Anjain pressed on in relocating the community and lobbying in Washington. His effort led to new US-funded scientific studies that found contamination problems on Rongelap requiring a clean up. This led to the US Congress appropriating an initial \$45 million resettlement fund — which the US Congress has increased subsequently.

It's not over for the Rongelap people but as Matayoshi looks back on the accomplishments of Senator Anjain he nods his head and carries a proud smile as he tells us "it was a gutsy move on the side of our senator," a man who Matayoshi recalls had trouble sleeping at nights.

Lijon Eknilang

"We had asked our national government to help us but they said no," said Lijon Eknilang.

During the years leading up to the move from Rongelap to Mejjatto, Eknilang was a councilwoman for the Rongelap Atoll Local Government.

"Originally the national government said that they would set aside \$20,000 to help us evacuate," said Eknilang. "But a few months later they changed their minds. We even asked the US and they denied us."

Despite the rejections from that national government and the US government, Rongelap elected leaders didn't give up.

"There were so many types of cancers," said Eknilang. "People were getting sick and frequently being sent off for medical treatments."

A community meeting was set up to decide the fate of the community.

"We asked the community to consider actually leaving Rongelap. Was is it what they truly wanted?" Said Eknilang. "We discussed everything with them so that when we did move off the island they wouldn't change their minds and say that we (the local council and Senator Jeton Anjain) were to blame."

According to Eknilang the whole community was in agreement that Rongelap Atoll

was contaminated and they had to evacuate before more people got sick.

“We were worried for the safety of our children,” said Eknilang. “Our main goal to move was to get the US to clean Rongelap.”

Despite doors being slammed for the Rongelap people, Eknilang recalls that her senator continued to search out help.

“When our national government withheld the money for our evacuation, Senator Anjain and Senator Imata Kabua approached Giff Johnson in Hawaii,” said Eknilang. “Giff told the senator about the Greenpeace boat Rainbow Warrior and introduced him to Steve Sawyer.

“The Senator then met with Sawyer and asked him to help and he agreed,” she said.

“When we finally moved to Mejjatto, even though there was nothing on the island, no food, no shelter our people didn’t complain. For us it was better to suffer at Mejjatto than to risk staying on Rongelap.”

‘We love the future of our kids’

By STEVE SAWYER

It seems to me that the whole evacuation experience is permanently engraved in my brain, both because it was one of the most powerful experiences of my life, and because I’ve been asked to re-hash it so many times, in part because of what happened a couple of months later in Auckland (when the Rainbow Warrior was bombed by French secret agents). Some of the memories:

- Sailing for the first time into the lagoon at Rongelap, seeing the church, the village, the cemetery and being greeted by ‘boom-booms’ carrying many of the women of the village singing to us with banners saying ‘we love the future of our kids’; I remember looking around and seeing the crew all standing and staring in emotional shock.

- On I think it was the second trip (of four), we were a bit undisciplined about the numbers of people we let on board, and left the lagoon at Rongelap with probably more people than we should have taken. The wind came up, and Pete Wilcox (the skipper) decided that it was too crowded on deck to raise the sails safely, so while the Warrior wallowed its way towards Mejjatto rolling back and forth in a moderate swell, we had a hundred or more seasick Marshallese to contend with! Needless to say, none of the crew got much of any sleep that night;

- I remember staying up most of the night during one trip with a fellow called Niktimus Anuntak trading stories about navigation, with us showing him the navigation gear on the bridge and explaining how it worked, and him telling us about traditional navigation techniques, which we’d all heard and read about — exchanging names in the different languages for the stars and constellations.

- When it came time to leave, I nearly had a mutiny on my hands, because a number of the crew didn’t want to leave. ‘We can’t just leave them here’; ‘We need to spend some more time helping them get settled in’. But we had a schedule to keep, and a key date to make in Auckland and then Moruroa. After arguing about it for a while, I started to have some doubts and actually asked Jeton Anjain about this, and he seemed

surprised, somewhat bemused, but was very clear that we should get on with what we had to do.

(The writer was the Greenpeace coordinator responsible for the Pacific voyage of the Rainbow Warrior in 1985, and participated in the evacuation of Rongelap Atoll in May that year.)