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Rongelap's wounds still raw since Bravo test

Rongelap Islander Lijon Eknilang spent several weeks in Europe in late February and March speaking to groups and the media about the March 1 50th anniversary of the Bravo hydrogen bomb test.

She received extensive coverage in the European media during the visit, putting a spotlight on health and environmental concerns of the test-affected islanders.

Speaking with the Journal on her return from abroad, Eknilang said her desire is to return home — if it's safe.

“The land we're living on belongs to someone else,” she said, a situation which only increases the desire of the Rongelap people to return to their home atoll.

“If it's clean, we'll go back,” she said, adding that it's been very difficult since the 1985 evacuation to Mejjatto, Kwajalein for Rongelap Islanders living away from Rongelap.

Eknilang also questioned the recent cut-off of US funding for the 177 Health Plan, saying that she's heard government officials say that they (Rongelapese) shouldn't worry because there's funding with the Department of Energy for medical care. But Eknilang said that the DOE only funds services for those who were exposed in 1954, which ignores the significant problem of the many people who became exposed after returning to Rongelap in 1957 when US scientists said it was safe for people to go back.

“I couldn't believe that somebody (the US government) could do that (cut off funding for the health program),” she said. “We didn't ask for the bomb tests.”

Under the new Compact health care and environmental monitoring is being cut or discontinued, she said. “In light of the damage they have done to us — not only the people of Rongelap but to the entire Marshall Islands — this is a grave breach of trust,”

she said.

“We were happy and independent people (before Bravo). The US did something bad and then turns around and walks away.”

What Lijon wants to know about Bravo

Before I die and leave this earth, I want to take this opportunity to ask some questions.

First, was there an agreement between the UN and USA when the UN gave the Marshall Islands to be under the hands of the US? Was there an agreement between these two nations on how to watch the Marshall Islands? If so, why didn't the UN step in to stop the US from testing nuclear bombs on our islands from 1946 until 1958?

Second, was there any knowledge among the US leadership that Rongelap, its people as well as US military personnel would be badly affected from these US nuclear tests before the tests took place? Where is the good that you (US) said that: “everything is in Gods hands”? Was there any understanding that the people of Rongelap, along with the US soldiers, would die from these tests? Did they have any clue of the harm these US nuclear tests would have on the people of Rongelap?

Third, is there any good from the programs that were conducted by PHRI (contractor providing medical services to Rongelap and Utrik) and Department of Energy (DOE), and why aren't our kids and grandchildren included in these medical programs? Why doesn't PHRI explain to us what is wrong with regards to getting money for medical treatment for the people of Rongelap? What do you (US) have to say now that you have ruined our lives and the health of our families?

Fourth, is the US even considering the debt they owe the people of Rongelap for the loss of their lands? These were our gifts from our ancestors. What about our sickness? They haven't gone away, and we're just getting worse.

Finally, is there anything I can do to help the US soldiers who were also affected by the Bravo test? Aside from our prayers, is there anything that we, the people of Rongelap can do to help those soldier and their families?

—**Lijon Eknilang**