

**From the Marshall Islands Journal Friday, March 4, 2005**



## **James calls for civilized solution**

Marshall Islanders at Tuesday's 51st anniversary of the largest-ever United States hydrogen bomb test called on the US to fairly compensate nuclear test survivors for the health and land damage they've suffered.

"As we mark another anniversary of Bravo, we mourn for those who've gone before and we grieve for those who suffered," said Rongelap Mayor James Matayoshi.

"But justice for the living is what's on our mind."

In the official ceremony, which was preceded by a parade with police honor guard and the national marching band, US Ambassador Greta Morris expressed "the deepest gratitude of the US government" to the people of the RMI for helping the US to win the Cold War. She also praised the Marshall Islanders fighting with the US armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"We deeply regret the Bravo accident," she said. "We empathize with your sorrow and loss."

Marshall Islanders can never forget March 1, 1954 when the 15-megaton Bravo test dumped radioactive fallout on unsuspecting islands, just as Japanese will never forget Hiroshima and Americans will never forget Pearl Harbor, Matayoshi said.

Some say a nuclear test is different from a war, but "it sure felt like we were under attack," said Matayoshi, whose mother was a young women living on Rongelap in 1954.

“March 1 is about suffering at the hands of the greatest nation in the world, not from an enemy,” he said.

But despite the consequences of Bravo — which have included a legacy of thyroid and other cancers, and contaminated land — it is important to bring closure with a sense of “fairness and forgiveness,” Matayoshi said.

This, he added, “is what civilized people do.”

The process needs to begin with unpaid Nuclear Claims Tribunal awards, Matayoshi said.

The Tribunal was established by US law through the Compact of Free Association to adjudicate all outstanding nuclear test claims. It has already approved — but not paid for lack of money — awards to islanders from Bikini and Enewetak that total about \$1 billion for nuclear clean up, hardship and loss of use. Decisions on claims from Rongelap and Utrik, two atolls affected by Bravo fallout, are expected to follow in the coming months and be in hundreds of millions of dollars.

“What do the Nuclear Claims Tribunal awards means (to the US)?” Matayoshi said. “The US won’t simply write a check. There has to be a process to determine the merits of the Tribunal awards.”

But, he said, if the US refuses to accept the Tribunal awards it means the Tribunal set up by “was a hoax, a sham and a trick.”

The Tribunal awards are hundreds of millions of dollars in excess of the \$45 million granted to it by the US to resolve nuclear claims. “If the decisions (of the Tribunal) were wrong or too much, they should be modified or rejected by the US,” he said. “But we the people who suffered cannot be ignored. To do so would not be honorable.”

## **Ismael: ‘Let’s work together’**

Marshall Islanders should not be afraid to speak out against the United States for what its nuclear tests did to this central Pacific nation, Enewetak Senator Ismael John told a gathering of more than 100 people on Tuesday in Majuro.

“I won’t back down,” he said. “Don’t be scared just because America has all the guns.”

John, who was a young man when the US Navy evacuated Enewetak in 1947 to make way for the first of 43 nuclear tests, said that “our land is our health.”

It isn’t an easy challenge to seek fair compensation from the United States. But Marshallese need to “hold hands and work together” to make their case, he said.

John said that he didn’t believe what the Americans said about the safety of his atoll because they are the ones who caused the problem.

He pointed out that two years before the March 1, 1954 Bravo hydrogen bomb test, the US tested Mike, a large hydrogen device nearly as big as Bravo.

John added that while the US claims only Rongelap and Utrik received fallout from the Bravo test, “in truth, all of the Marshall Islands was exposed.”

# Uniting to fight cover-ups around the globe

By GIFF JOHNSON

Survivors of two of the world's worst nuclear accidents discovered they have much in common during activities in Majuro this week to commemorate the 51st anniversary of the Bravo test, America's largest hydrogen bomb exploded on Bikini Atoll on March 1, 1954.

"The reason the exposure was so bad is that we were lied to all the time," said Dr. Lyudmyla Porokhnyak, a citizen of the Ukraine and a survivor of the world's worst nuclear reactor disaster at Chernobyl in 1986. Porokhnyak was speaking Monday to a group of Marshall Islanders who survived the Bravo test, which, much like the Chernobyl accident, spewed radioactive fallout unsuspecting islanders living downwind.

The heads of Marshall Islanders in attendance at Monday's conference to mark the 51st anniversary of Bravo nodded repeatedly during Porokhnyak's speech, confirming the many similarities between the two experiences separated by three decades and thousands of miles.

While Porokhnyak recounted how the authorities of the then-Soviet Union initially attempted to cover up the 1986 accident and downwind contamination, Marshall Islanders experienced similar efforts by the United States government in 1954 to downplay the devastating impact of the Bravo test on downwind islanders — government actions that they contend led to further exposure of people in both countries.

Islanders were not evacuated from islands that were engulfed in snow-like radioactive fallout for two-to-three days after the Bravo test. Although many of the more than 200 islanders who were heavily exposed developed severe radiation burns on their skin and had their hair fall out, US Atomic Energy Commission authorities issued a press statement following the test saying that "there were no burns" and the islanders were in good health. US officials then allowed islanders to return home to live in radioactive environments soon after the test without any radioactive clean up work on their islands.

Porokhnyak said that Soviet authorities attempt to hush up the Chernobyl meltdown had disastrous results. Activities — ranging from outdoor weddings and crop planting to May 1 rallies attended by millions in the Ukraine capital of Kiev — were allowed to continue as if nothing had happened so as not to cause a panic about the accident, resulting in people being unnecessarily exposed to radiation from the Chernobyl plant, she said. Even the people evacuated from Prypiat, a city of 50,000 close to Chernobyl, were only resettled a few miles further away, so continued to be exposed to radiation in the environment, she said.

Rayon William, a Rongelap Islander, said on Monday that she wasn't on her home island during the 1954 hydrogen bomb test at Bikini, but returned there with other islanders when the US authorities said it was safe in 1957. "I ate food from the land and sea," she said, adding that she now knows that the food was laced with radioactivity from the Bravo test. "I've experienced many illnesses as a result of living in a contaminated island."

It wasn't until after Rongelap Islanders evacuated themselves from Rongelap in 1985 that the US Congress funded scientific studies that confirmed Rongelap Islanders' fears that their home atoll was still contaminated and in need of nuclear clean up work. Subsequently, the Congress funded a \$45 million resettlement trust fund that is now paying for a clean up and resettlement program.

Monday's conference was sponsored by the survivors group 'ERUB', an acronym for the four most heavily exposed islands (Enewetak, Rongelap, Utrik and Bikini) that also means 'broken' or 'damaged' in Marshallese language.

Porokhnyak said that while the Soviet government was responsible for the initial cover up of Chernobyl, a cover up continues today by the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"The U.N. and the IAEA are perpetuating the cover up, saying that only 34 people died from Chernobyl," she said. "This figure is absurd."

She charged that fully 10 percent of the 600,000 workers who were brought into Chernobyl in the two months after the accident to clean up and shut down the nuclear plant have died in the 19 years since.

She said that medical workers in the Ukraine are seeing many health effects that they believe are related directly to the Chernobyl accident, including severe immune system problems in the population. She cited what she described as an "epidemic of tuberculosis" in the Ukraine that is highly unusual for a developed nation. She also noted that Ukrainian men have the world's highest infertility rate, which she attributes in large part to radiation exposure.

Porokhnyak said she was worried by declining funding for medical and environmental studies needed to determine the long-term risk to people in the Ukraine and the safety of land around Chernobyl.

Rongelap Islander Almira Matayoshi, who was a child when she was exposed to Bravo test fallout, said Monday that it took nearly 30 years for Marshall Islands nuclear survivors to begin gaining international attention to their plight by speaking out at global forums and lobbying the US Congress to focus attention on health problems in their islands.