



"and they shall beat their
swords into ploughshares..."

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The Nuclear Pacific

Nuclear Laboratory of the big powers

Canada is a Pacific nation but few Canadians know that March 1 is **Nuclear Free Pacific Day**, declared so by the Pacific Peoples' Action Front and the Pacific Council of Churches. The day commemorates the advent of the nuclear age in the Pacific when, in 1954, the United States exploded a nuclear weapon on the Bikini Atoll in Micronesia, its radioactive fallout contaminating residents of neighbouring islands, Japanese fishermen in the area, and U.S. military personnel. Through the years since then the south Pacific has become the nuclear laboratory of the big powers, the U.S., U.S.S.R., Britain and France all having tested nuclear weapons and missiles there. Today the Pacific Ocean is the arena for the U.S./Soviet contest for nuclear submarine "superiority". Canadian connections with the nuclear Pacific include the Strait of Juan de Fuca, through which U.S. nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed submarines in the Trident series will have to pass to get to and from their home base at Bangor, Washington; Nanoose Bay on Vancouver Island, where submarine detection experiments are carried out; and Canadian Armed Forces anti-submarine warfare activities carried out on the West Coast, for which new long-range-patrol aircraft are now on order.

The consequences of the Nuclear Pacific for the residents of the thousands of Pacific Islands have frequently been devastating. The following overview of the nuclear Pacific has been adapted from articles by two Australian peace activists.*



Nuclear bomb crater one mile in diameter and 170 feet deep

Its vast area and small, scattered population make the Pacific an attractive theatre of military operations to both superpowers. U.S. interest in the area goes back to the nineteenth century when it assumed control over Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa and the Philippines. Since World War II the U.S. has had a United Nations mandate over Micronesia, a Pacific Trust Territory in the West Pacific of about 2000 islands some two and a half thousand miles south-west of Hawaii.

... their isolation and small populations made the islands attractive for secret military projects.

The military importance of the area was emphasized in 1973 by the then U.S. Secretary of Defense, James Schlesinger:

"The region not only surrounds the access routes to Guam, but also those to the Near East, and our sources of Asian raw materials can be controlled from Micronesia. Moreover, a north-south line of communication, of greater and greater

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importance, passes through the region, linking our Northern allies, Japan and Korea, to our allies and friends in the South, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and Indonesia. In the strong sense of the term, the US must remain a Pacific Power."

American withdrawal from south-east Asia in the mid-1970s led to increased interest in the Pacific as an area vital to U.S. strategic interests. As part of U.S. territory, Micronesia was seen to have economic advantages as a base for troops away from the U.S. mainland. Furthermore, their physical isolation and small populations, combined with an ineffective local political opposition, made the islands attractive for secret military projects and capital-intensive (not to mention pollution-intensive) industrial schemes that might be politically intolerable at home. In fact, the islands are currently under consideration as a site for nuclear waste disposal.

The Soviet Union has always been active in the north Pacific, deploying its growing naval fleet there and testing missiles between the Cook Islands and Line Islands. Soviet interest in the South China Sea has been growing, its potential for oil and China's claims over the Spratly and Paracel islands making it an area for potential conflict.

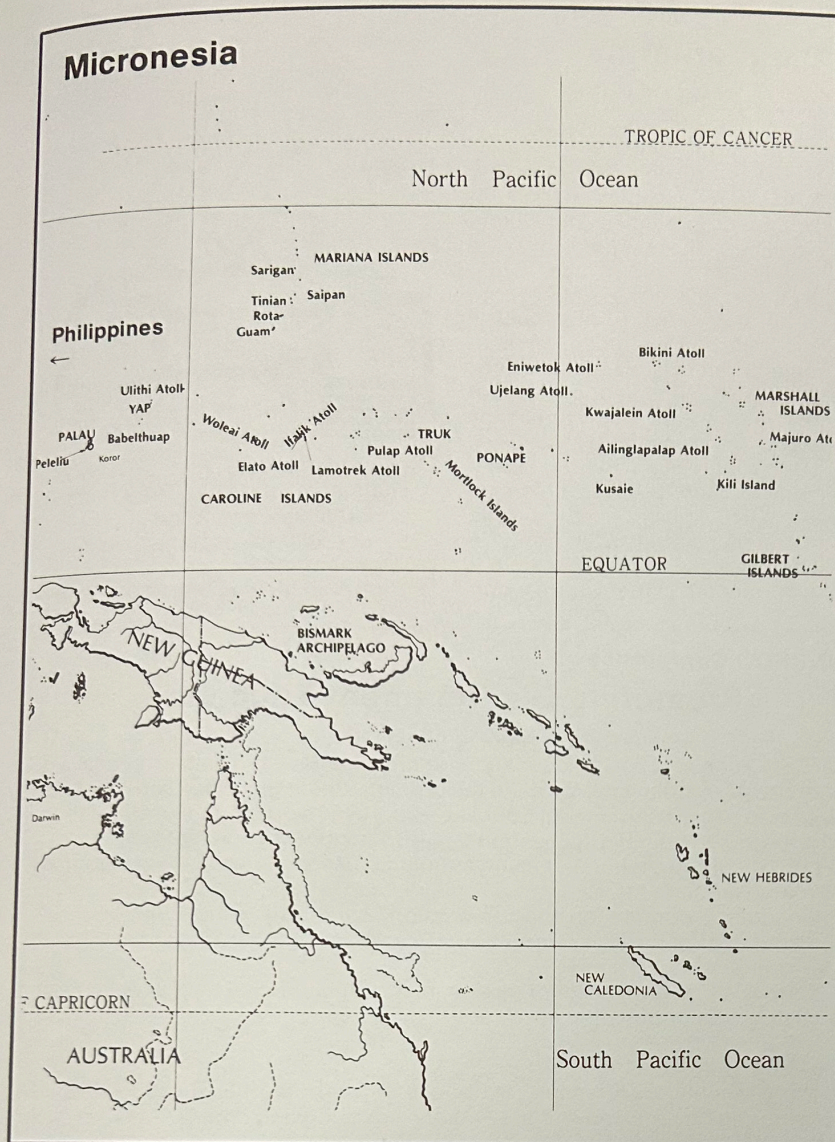
Economic Interests

Economic interests are also important to the region. In addition to fishing and mining, seabed mining has substantial potential since the discovery of nodules on the ocean floor containing manganese, nickel, copper, cobalt and other minerals.

Big power competition within the region promises to be an important ingredient of island life for a long time to come, and the most tragic consequence of that involvement follows from superpower nuclear weapons activity. The isolation of the Marshall Islands at the eastern perimeter of Micronesia has set them aside for a special role in the nuclear arms race.

Before World War II the Marshall islanders, like most other Micronesians, were self-sufficient, living off the ocean and land. Though covering a great expanse of ocean, the Marshalls' 28 multi-islet atolls and five single islands comprise only about 70 square miles. The atolls are rings of 15 to as many as 97 islets connected

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The Nuclear Pacific

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by a coral reef that encircles a clear blue lagoon. Out of necessity, the Marshallese are traditionally expert fishermen, deriving most of their protein from the rich lagoons, while the land provides coconuts, bread-fruit, pandanus and taro.

The most isolated and least westernized of the Marshallese lived on the northern atolls of Bikini and Eniwetak. Having little contact with foreigners (not even with the Japanese during their 25-year occupation), they relied on the outside world for almost nothing, and it was this very isolation that thrust Bikini and Eniwetak people into the nuclear age.

In January 1946, Navy officials in Washington, D.C., announced that

Bikini Atoll fitted all requirements for *Operation Crossroads*, designed to test the destructive power of nuclear weapons on naval vessels. When the U.S. military governor of the Marshalls went to Bikini in February, he

told the people that American scientists were experimenting with nuclear weapons "for the good of mankind and to end all world wars." He promised that their atoll would be returned after the tests were finished, and asked that they consent to be moved to another island. With more than 42,000 military, scientific and technical personnel, 250 naval ships and more than 150 observation ships and aircraft poised to enter Bikini Atoll for *Operation Crossroads*, the 166 Bikinians had little choice but to leave their island.

Less than two years later, in December 1947, the Navy decided to use another atoll, Eniwetak, for a second series of atomic tests. The Eniwetakese, like the Bikinians, were relocated by the United States quickly and with little planning to small, uninhabited atolls.

Social Chaos

For these few hundred Micronesians it was the start of years of moving from one island to another, fighting hunger, malnutrition and social chaos; for the U.S. military it was the start of 12 years of nuclear weapons testing on the two islands.

In 1952, the first hydrogen device was tested at Eniwetak. The blast, estimated at 10.4 megatons, completely vaporized one island in the atoll and left a crater one mile in diameter and 170 feet deep in the coral reef.

On March 1, 1954, the United States detonated *Bravo*, the first test of a deliverable hydrogen bomb, at Bikini Atoll and severely contaminated fishermen aboard the *Lucky Dragon*, a Japanese fishing vessel that had strayed into nearby waters. More than 200 Marshallese on the neighboring atolls of Rongelap and Utrik, and some 28 Americans monitoring the explosion were also contaminated.

After their evacuation to the Navy base at Kwajalein, many of the exposed Marshallese began to experience

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Disarmament Times

The DISARMAMENT TIMES, the only newspaper that reports regularly and fully on disarmament issues in the UN context, is published by the NGO Committee on Disarmament at UN Headquarters (eight issues in 1980).

Designed for the United Nations community, peace organizations, and concerned persons, it is an important source of material to help inform and orient efforts for disarmament and peace.

Subscription: \$4 for first class mail. DISARMAMENT TIMES, 777 U.N. Plaza, New York, N.Y., U.S.A. 10017.

Leaving Bikini with materials to build new houses on Rongerik.



The Nuclear Pacific (Continued)

perience the effects of severe radiation poisoning: itching and burning of the skin, eyes and mouth; nausea; vomiting and diarrhea. Later in the month, in the second stage of acute radiation exposure, many of the people began to wholly or partially lose their hair, and skin burns began appearing on the necks, shoulders, arms and feet of those most heavily exposed.

The Utrik people were told by the Atomic Energy Commission that "their island was only slightly contaminated and considered safe for habitation," and they were moved back in May 1954.

"Valuable data"

Three years later the Rongelapese were permitted to return home — after a July 1957 radiological survey stated that "in spite of slight lingering radioactivity" Rongelap Atoll was safe for rehabilitation. With this dubious recommendation, the Rongelapese returned. Brookhaven National Laboratory (on contract to the AEC) reported that:

"Even though . . . the radioactive contamination of Rongelap Island is considered perfectly safe for human habitation, the levels of activity are higher than those found in other inhabited locations in the world. The habitation of these people on the island will afford most valuable ecological radiation data on human beings."

During the next two decades the data came in. High incidences of still-births and miscarriages, more than 90 per cent of Rongelap children suffering thyroid tumors or cancers, and in 1977 the cancer and thyroid disease rate among the Utrikese rose so sharply that it equalled that of the much more heavily exposed

Rongelap population. This unexpected increase has forced government scientists in the U.S. to revise theories on which radiation dose rate will lead to adverse human effects.

While the Utrik and Rongelap populations were experiencing the effects of direct fallout exposure, the peoples of Bikini and Enewetak were attempting to survive in their U.S.-imposed exile on tiny, inhospitable islands. But by 1969 the AEC radiological survey stated: "There's virtually no radiation left and we can find no discernible effect on plant or animal life (on Bikini)."

The Bikinians began to return home. By the mid-70s, however, radiation levels on Bikini were exceeding U.S. guidelines and in 1977 tests showed that the Bikinians were ingesting higher than acceptable concentrations of cancer-causing radiation from water and food. The U.S. response was to import all food and water, but by early 1978 Bikini was declared unfit for human habitation owing to radiation

levels in Bikinians of twice the maximum U.S. safety standard. In May 1978 it was announced that Bikini would be evacuated within 90 days.

For Micronesians a nuclear-free Pacific will not remove the radiation that is already in their bodies and environment, but it will promise a future in which the experiences of the people of Rongelap, Utrik, Enewetak and Bikini over the past three decades will not need to be repeated.

Write to Project Ploughshares for more information about the "nuclear Pacific".

*Peter D. Jones, "The Nuclear Pacific: An Overview", appeared in the Winter 1979 issue of Nuclear Countdown: A Journal of Pacific Resistance, P.O. Box A243, Sydney South, Nsw 2000, Australia.

Giff Johnson, "Micronesia: America's 'strategic' trust", appeared in the February 1979 issue of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists and in the November/December 1979 issue of Anti-War Action, newsletter of the Association for International Co-operation and Disarmament.

Theatre of the Absurd

There is an unreality about the world military situation in 1979 that begins with its sheer size. Few of us can follow with interest the incredible numbers involved: millions of people in peacetime armies; trillions of dollars in wasted resources; nuclear overkill sufficient to destroy every city in the world many times over.

How much more difficult will it be for the historians of the future to find reality in this militarized world of 1979? How will their best computers deal with the balance of terror, the specialized language of the weaponeers, the gaming of megadeaths, the military grotesqueries of today?

→ What kind of world was it, they will try to imagine, that celebrated the Year of the Child while adding to a vast pool of deadly nuclear waste that would be its most long-lasting legacy to hundreds of generations to come?

→ Did their civil servants seriously play out war games that no one could win, but that required aggressor and defender alike to sacrifice hundreds of millions of their own people in nuclear deaths?

→ When nuclear weapons were developed and there proved to be no defense against them, was it self-deception or a sense of irony that led governments to rename their war ministries "defense" ministries?

→ After the leading defense minister stated that nuclear war between the two superpowers would destroy in hours all that the two nations had built over centuries, where is the record of the public outcry against making even more such weapons?

→ How did the nuclear powers plan to control the prevailing winds over Europe to ensure that in event of war radioactive fallout would not blow back on their allies and themselves, killing them as freely as their enemies?

→ Who were the leaders who were prepared to march millions of young men against battlefield weapons that would blow them into radioactive dust?

Of course, the historians will conclude, it was not the real world of 1979; it was pure theater, global fantasy, a diversion no doubt from intractable social problems.

— From *World Military and Social Expenditures 1979*, by Ruth Leger Sivard

Copies of this handbook on disarmament and development priorities can be purchased at cost from Project Ploughshares (\$3.50 single copy, \$2.50 each for 4 or more copies).