

Marshalls' Mushroom Cloud

Shadow, Blame Fall On U.S.

SAIPAN - Nineteen years ago a glow lit up the sky so brightly that people on the tiny atoll of Rongelap in the Marshall Islands thought the sun was rising in the west. What they saw was not the sun, but the explosion of what at the time was the largest thermonuclear device

ever detonated. Rising from the surface of Bikini Atoll to a height of more than 100,000 feet, a huge mushroom cloud composed largely of radioactive debris began to spread on the wind. As it spread, this deadly debris was scattered over a large portion of the Pacific and, eventually, the world.

On Rongelap, some 100 miles from Bikini, the 64 residents were not aware of the bomb test, nor could

they account for the strange white ash that began falling like snow on their islands a few hours later. The substance eventually accumulated to a depth of more than an inch. It fell into the eyes of several people. Others tasted it in an effort to determine what it was. It washed from tin roofs into water catchment tanks during a light rain that followed the test, contaminating the entire island water supply.

The "accidental" irradiation of these people need not have happened. The winds that day were not supposed to blow that way. But, in the words of a special report presented to the Congress of Micronesia:

"The decision to 'go' (with the test) that was made sometime early that morning would produce much confusion and conflict, suffering and suspicion. It would result in controversy that is unresolved to this day."

A recent report stated flatly: "The United States of America, either through the Department of Defense and its instrumentalities, the Atomic Energy Commission or the Department of the Interior and its instrumentality, the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, is directly responsible and accountable for the actual injury and suffering, disease and possible death experienced by the Marshallese exposed to the fallout from the March 1, 1954 'Bravo' shot."

The report is one of the longest, most technical documents ever compiled

by a committee of the Congress. The Special Joint Committee on Rongelap and Utirik, created by law only last year, talked with hundreds of people in the Trust Territory and in Japan - thousands of miles travelled in its investigation of the tragic results of that bomb explosion in 1954. They have come up with a report that is comprehensive, scholarly, precise in its research, open in its premises, and damning in the conclusions it suggests.

For while there is no accusation in the report that the United States "deliberately" allowed the people of Rongelap and Utirik to become exposed to dangerously high levels of radiation, such a conclusion is discussed.

There is the strong suggestion that the decision to conduct the test despite an adverse weather report was unwarranted and continued unwillingness of official United States agencies to release full information about the incident today is an effort to "minimize" the and its effects.

The report is dedicated to Liko Anjan, the Rongelap boy who died last year in the U.S. of acute leukemia. Likoj was one year old when the radioactive "snow" fell on his home. His disease may not have been caused by irradiation, but the evidence clearly suggests that it was. The dedication is also to the family of Likoj, and the people of Rongelap and Utiirik.

The special joint committee consisted of three members of congress, Rep's Hans Wiliander (Truk) and Timothy Okeriil (Palau) and the chairman, Sen. Olympio Borja (Marianas). The committee also had the services of Rep. Ataji Balos (Marshalls), who represents the people of Rongelap, as interpreter and informant.

The committee had three mandates, according to Borja. These were: "To investigate the results of the exposure (of the people of Rongelap and Utiirik) to radiation; to attempt to secure all medical aid and assistance possible for them, and to attempt to secure compensation for their injuries."

"The United States of America, in exercising its strategic and security rights under the (trusteeship) agreement, has tested nuclear weapons on our islands," said the senator in a statement to his senate colleagues. "This testing resulted in injury and possibly death to Micronesians in violation of America's responsibilities to protect our people under the same agreement. The United States and the Trust Territory Government have

never seen fit to adequately explain the circumstances surrounding the event or in some cases, treat fairly the people involved. It is from this situation that we draw our moral obligation to conduct the study and make the report."