

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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News-Feature Material

RETURN OF THE NATIVES: BIKINI
PEOPLE COMING HOME THIS YEAR

For hundreds of natives of Bikini Atoll, 1974 means homecoming.

They had been removed to neighboring islands in the mid-Pacific Marshalls chain before the atomic bomb tests began in July of 1946.

Beneath the waters of Bikini's 25-mile lagoon lies a fleet of United States and foreign naval vessels sunk in "Operation Crossroads" -- Germany's Prinz Eugen, Japan's Nagato, the U.S. carrier Saratoga, the battleships Nevada, New York and others.

Witnessed by United Nations representatives, here was the first peacetime nuclear weapons testing to obtain precise data on the effects of land, air and underwater detonations.

With more than 20 nuclear tests between 1946 and 1958, it was worldwide news when the Bikini area was declared decontaminated and safe for rehabilitation in 1968.

And now, after 28 years, the United States government is resettling the Micronesian families in newly constructed housing and community facilities amid coconut groves and food crop plantings begun in 1969.

Making Bikini and neighboring Enyu islands livable again has been a longterm project of the Department of the Interior, which is charged with management of the Pacific Trust Territory, assisted in the cleanup by the Department of Defense and the Atomic Energy Commission.

Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton said that plans call for the first groups of resettled families to be brought from the island of Kili in the southern Marshalls by mid-April of this year.

The relatively slow timetable of resettlement since the islands were declared decontaminated in 1968 reflects the growing pace of the coconut trees and other food sources such as the breadfruit tree. The coconut is essential to life on a coral atoll, Secretary Morton explained, providing food, drink, building materials and -- when dried, as copra -- the main source of trade income.

"We realize that a coconut tree requires from six to ten years to become productive, and our plans call for food assistance until the families become self-reliant," Morton said. "A feature of resettlement is the employment of the Bikini people themselves as we make these islands a fit place for human habitation once again."

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