



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

The Rongelap People / Senator Jeton Anjain (Marshall Islands)

Joint Award with Marie-Thérèse and Bengt Danielsson (1991)



"...for their steadfast struggle against United States nuclear policy in support of their right to live on an unpolluted Rongelap island."

Jeton Anjain

In 1954 the United States exploded on Bikini atoll in the Pacific a bomb 1,000 times more powerful than that used at Hiroshima. Just 100 miles away and directly in the fallout path, was the inhabited island of Rongelap. When the fallout came, the people thought it was snowing and the children played with the white dust. It was two days before they were evacuated with acute radiation sickness, having been exposed to more than two-thousand times today's maximum permissible one-year dose.

In 1956 the US government told the Rongelapese that it was safe to return. But the community, then about 250 people, continued to experience health problems characteristic of radiation exposure: growth retardation, thyroid rumours, cancer. In 1973 laboratory tests of islanders' urine showed plutonium concentrations ten times higher than those of Bikini residents, but these results were kept secret for 14 years. A report by the US Department of Energy in 1982 did nevertheless show Rongelap to be as contaminated as Bikini.

For the next three years, Senator Jeton Anjain, the Rongelap representative to the Marshall Islands parliament, sought in vain to persuade officials to transfer his people to a safer environment and commission independent tests on the island. In 1985, their patience exhausted, the 220 islanders finally left Rongelap and settled on an inhospitable atoll 120 miles away with inadequate food and no medical care.

Anjain was vilified by American government officials for the decision to evacuate his people. But he was determined to force Rongelap back onto the American agenda, given that Bikini and Enewetak received tens of millions of clean-up and rehabilitation dollars, whereas Rongelap rated barely a footnote in the US response to its nuclear legacy in the Marshall Islands.

The islanders were told in 1988 that it was safe for adults to return if they avoided the northern part

of the island, but they were not reassured. Anjain continued lobbying the US Congress for independent radiation tests; he engaged foreign scientists to testify for the islanders and generally kept the issue alive. In 1990 his researches revealed that the US - in breach of its Compact of Free Association with the Marshall Islands - was still maintaining an atmospheric nuclear test capability in the Rongelap area as part of its 'safeguards' in case the Soviet Union broke the Partial Test Ban Treaty.

Perhaps as a result of embarrassment over this issue, the US government in 1991 finally agreed to the independent health and radiation survey of Rongelap for which Anjain had been struggling for years.

Senator Anjain did not live long enough to see the Rongelapese return home. But before his death from cancer in 1993 he had irrevocably changed the terms of US relations with his island and its people.

Quotation

"Anjain has set the stage for the Rongelap people to regain the dignity that has escaped them since [atomic tests] became part of their lexicon, unleashing a nightmare that has lasted nearly 40 years. Anjain has offered an opportunity to America to fulfil its long overdue obligation to the community that it nuked in the name of the Cold War. Those who fill the vacuum left by his untimely passing will have big shoes to fill, but a clear path to follow."

Marshall Islands Journal (Anjain's Obituary)

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