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December 8, 1954

AEC 125/15

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ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION

COMMITMENTS MADE TO THE MARSHALL ISLANDERS

Note by the Secretary

The attached letters to the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State are circulated for the information of the Commission.

W.B. McCool

Secretary

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UNITED STATES
ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D. C.

December 2, 1954

The Honorable John Foster Dulles
The Secretary of State

Dear Mr. Secretary:

In my letter dated September 30 *to Under Secretary Walter Bedell Smith, I noted the Commission's interest in an expeditious settlement of the problems arising from the use of certain locations in the Marshall Islands for the conduct of nuclear experiments. Mr. Smith, in his letter of September 11,** forwarding copies of letters received from Ambassador Lodge and Mr. Mason Sears, had requested that the Commission inform the Department of State of the steps being taken to carry out the commitments made by the U. S. Government to the Marshall Islanders affected by the Pacific tests. In my interim letter to Mr. Smith I stated that the Commission would prepare a detailed reply on this subject.

In the recent meetings of the U. N. Trusteeship Council the United States gave assurances that it would take every precaution to prevent the recurrence of casualties as a result of fallout such as occurred following the March 1 experiment. As you know, immediately following that test, which was the first of the CASTLE series, the warning area around the test site was greatly enlarged. A warning area of similar scope will certainly be established in any future experiments conducted in the Pacific Proving Grounds. You may be assured that the Commission is determined that no repetition of such an accident shall occur.

As Mr. Mason Sears has recorded in his letter to you of July 23,** a copy of which Mr. Smith forwarded to the Commission with his letter of September 11, there are two outstanding problems which relate to compensation to the Marshall Islanders as the result of Pacific test activities. The first of these concerns compensation due the inhabitants of Bikini, who were displaced in 1946. In respect to this aspect of the problem a Memorandum of Understanding is now being negotiated between the

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Departments of Navy and Interior under the terms of which use and occupancy agreements will be negotiated between the Department of the Navy and the Government of the Trust Territory for the use of Bikini and Eniwetok atolls by the Atomic Energy Commission. The Commission has authorized the Department of Navy to represent the Commission in these negotiations. As presently visualized the agreements for the use of Bikini and Eniwetok, when completed, will provide for lump sum payments to the Government of Trust Territory from funds appropriated by the Congress to the Department of the Navy. These payments will enable the Government of Trust Territory to compensate the Bikinians. The Commission has been advised that the Department of the Navy is continuing the negotiations with the Department of Interior, and it is our hope that this aspect of the compensation matter can be finally discharged in the near future.

The second aspect of this problem refers to the promises made to compensate the Rongelap and Uterik people for damages resulting from the March 1 fall-out. The Department of Defense, under authority derived from the Foreign Claims Act, has agreed to consider and settle these claims. It should be noted, however, that such claims must be presented within one year after the occurrence of the incident out of which the claim arises. The Commission is not aware that any claims from the people of Rongelap and Uterik have yet been received.

Immediately after the March 1 fall-out, it was deemed necessary, as you know, to remove the natives of Rongelap and Uterik to Kwajalein for medical observation and care. The natives received the finest medical attention available. It soon became apparent that the natives of Uterik had not been exposed to dangerous amounts of radioactive fallout and they were returned to their native homes, under living conditions equivalent to or better than those existing before their evacuation. Continued medical attention was given, however, to the natives of Rongelap who had received significant amounts of radioactive contamination. Because of residual radioactivity on Rongelap, it was deemed wise to resettle the Rongelapians on another atoll until the activity had decayed to a safe level. These people have therefore been temporarily housed on the island of Ejit in Majuro Atoll. Housing was constructed for them under supervision of an A.E.C. contractor, using funds supplied by Joint Task Force 7. These houses, of plywood with aluminum roofs, have been so constructed as to make it possible to remove them to the natives' original home when it is safe for them to return.

Meanwhile the Atomic Energy Commission has accepted the responsibility for continued medical examinations of the natives of Rongelap as a routine precautionary measure. The first medical recheck has just recently been completed and was conducted for the Commission by medical teams from the Naval Medical Research Institute and the Navy Radiological Defense Laboratory. The preliminary report of these medical teams has been reviewed in the Commission and reveals that no permanent impairment of the natives' health is to be expected. A further medical recheck will take place probably around February 1955 and further checks will be made thereafter.

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The A.E.C. has also accepted the responsibility for such periodic resurveys of Rongelap and the collection of biological specimens and soil samples as may be necessary to determine the earliest possible time when the natives may be safely returned to their homes. The first such resurvey is presently being planned and it is expected that it will be made within the next two months. It is still the Commission's view that the residual level of radio-activity will decay to insignificance and the natives will be returned to their homes by May 1955.

You will be interested in two further programs which the Commission is considering in order to improve the living conditions of the Marshall Islanders.

Acting on a suggestion made originally by Mr. Midkiff, then High Commissioner of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, the Commission has agreed to bear the cost of constructing an island communication system between Kili and Jaluit and the construction of family housing units on Jaluit which will enable the Bikinians on Kili to fish in the Lagoon at Jaluit. It is planned that the actual construction will be supervised by A.E.C. contractor personnel and paid for from A.E.C. funds.

The Commission's Division of Biology and Medicine, in cooperation with the Trust Territory and the University of Hawaii, is investigating the possibility of undertaking certain agricultural programs to increase food production for the people on Kili and Majuro and for the Marshall Islands generally. The objective is to provide the islanders displaced from their homes by the Pacific experiments with a satisfactory ecological environment. This project, in which the Commission is deeply interested, would have an importance to the Marshallese far beyond the alleviation of distress arising from the conduct of nuclear experiments.

I hope that the information which is set forth in this letter will place the Department in the position to deal effectively with any charges which may be made in the United Nations discussions or elsewhere concerning our test activities in the Trust Territory.

Inasmuch as the responsibility for carrying out the commitments made to the Marshall Islanders are shared with the Commission by the Department of Defense and the Department of Interior, I have taken the liberty of sending copies of this letter to Secretary Wilson and Secretary McKay.

Sincerely yours,

Lewis L. Strauss
Chairman

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UNITED STATES
ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

December 2, 1954

The Honorable Charles Wilson*
The Secretary of Defense

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I am enclosing herewith a copy of a letter which I have addressed to Secretary Dulles which records the Commission's understanding of the present status of the measures being taken to carry out the commitments made to the Marshall Islanders affected by the conduct of nuclear tests in the Pacific Proving Grounds.

Sincerely yours,

Lewis L. Strauss
Chairman

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Secretariat Note: * Similar letter sent to the Secretary of Interior.