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Dear Senator Burdick:

Thank you for your letter of March 1 calling to our attention correspondence which Senator Case has had with Mr. and Mrs. Todd E. Jenkins, Peace Corps Volunteers on Kili in the Marshall Islands. Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins are concerned with the situation of the former Bikini people who now reside on Kili and desire to effect their immediate return to their home atoll. As you are no doubt aware, Mr. Jenkins has now written to the United Nations asking for an investigation by the Trusteeship Council of the possible return of the islanders to Bikini. A news report of this action appeared in the Washington Post of Thursday, March 7.

Included in the correspondence which Senator Case provided you is a copy of a letter from this Department's Office of Territories dated December 15, 1967. There is little which I can add at this time to that letter, which was intended to indicate the extreme concern which the High Commissioner and we have for the Bikini people, as well as to summarize briefly their history to the present time. We also wished to indicate that the High Commissioner and we are seeking an orderly solution to the problem.

Let me expand somewhat on the latter point. Recognizing the desire of the former Bikini people to return to their home atoll, we have been attempting to proceed on a step-by-step basis. First, it is clearly necessary to determine whether or not it is now safe, from a health standpoint, for the people to return to Bikini. As noted in our letter, over a year ago this Department asked the Atomic Energy Commission to analyze the levels of radiation in the islands that comprise the atoll to determine whether a people who have been relatively unexposed to radioactivity may now live a normal and useful life there. The field work for this study was conducted by the Atomic Energy Commission last April and the months since then have been used for a careful and painstaking analysis of the data collected. During High Commissioner Norwood's recent visit to Washington he and representatives of the Office of Territories met only last week with the Atomic Energy Commission for a status report. The analyses are not yet completed and it is, therefore, premature for us to say whether or not, from the health standpoint, it is now safe for these people to return to Bikini. We have not yet been able to clarify the September 1966 statement attributed to Mr. Norwood by Mr. Jenkins to the effect that Bikini could be re-settled in 1966, but, if Mr. Norwood made such a statement, he based it on information which has since been proven to be unreliable.

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The second step, assuming that the health question is answered affirmatively, will be to determine whether or not there is a continuing Defense requirement for the atoll which would preclude return of the Bikini people. Obviously, if the island is unsafe from the health standpoint, we need not address ourselves to the defense question. However, you may be assured that if the island is determined to be safe, we shall immediately approach the appropriate Defense officials with respect to this second question. The Department of Defense is aware that this question may be raised, and that it will need to be answered promptly.

As a third step, again assuming that the island is safe from the health standpoint and that the Defense requirements are such that the people can return, it will be necessary to mount a massive landclearing program, village reconstruction program, and crop-planting program. In addition, the High Commissioner and we would certainly intend to do all possible to provide economic opportunities for the returned people which would lift them beyond the mere subsistence economy which they had prior to their removal from the islands in the 1940's.

The major islands of the Bikini Atoll are very heavily overgrown with an almost impenetrable growth of vegetation which has little or no economic value. This growth must be removed before any but the most meager subsistence would be possible on the island. It is our understanding that there remain very few coconut trees, without which life on a coral atoll is virtually impossible. There are few if any other plants growing on the island which would sustain life for the returned people. Accordingly, once the non-economic overgrowth has been removed a major replanting program will be required. While some crops in the Pacific mature rapidly, it takes seven years for a newly-planted coconut tree to bear fruit. Obviously, the solution to the problem of the people of Bikini is not one which can be effected immediately, even if we assume that affirmative answers to our first two questions were available today.

I hope the foregoing information will be of help to you and to Senator Case. We in the Department of the Interior regret most seriously that Mr. Jenkins has chosen to try to help the people of Kili through an appeal to the Trusteeship Council and thereby to the press. Unfortunately, the solution to the problem requires scientific answers to scientific questions, plus a major effort in terms of providing massive clearing, reconstruction, and replanting. The latter can only be accomplished, we believe, with the cooperation of the several involved executive agencies of the United States, the Congress, and the people of the territory. At best, despite the sense of urgency which the High Commissioner and we have, it cannot be accomplished forthwith.

We regret that Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins have apparently encouraged and promoted hopes in the Bikini people that may be impossible to realize or that, at best, will take some months to achieve. For our part, we shall continue to press for an orderly solution at the earliest possible date.

Sincerely yours,

(Sgd.) HARRY R. ANDERSON

Assistant Secretary of the Interior

Hon. Quentin N. Burdick
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