

The Arms Race

The United States shocked the world when it dropped an atomic bomb on Japan to end World War II. Then, in 1949, when Russia set off an atomic bomb in a test in Kazakhstan, we found out that the United States was not the only country with nuclear weapons.



This began the contest between the United States and the Soviet Union known as the arms race. The arms race was a major part of the Cold War. Both countries produced more and more powerful nuclear weapons to try to stay ahead of the other. They knew that this was a dangerous contest. After all, when the US dropped the atomic bombs on Japan, thousands and thousands of people were killed instantly, and the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed. What they did not understand yet was that nuclear weapons had even more hidden dangers.

The United States would learn about these hidden dangers when it conducted nuclear bomb tests on Bikini Atoll. Bikini Atoll is a group of 23 small coral islands grouped around a 25-mile wide lagoon in the Pacific Ocean. They are part of the Marshall Islands.

The United States chose Bikini Atoll as the testing site for some of their most powerful atomic bombs. This nuclear testing program was named "Operation Crossroads." At the beginning of the testing, the island people were moved off of the islands closest to ground zero. They were told that the tests were necessary to insure world peace, and they were also told that they would be able to move back soon after the testing was completed.

Many nuclear tests were conducted there, but the one named Bravo was the largest. Bravo turned out to be far more powerful than expected. The mushroom shaped cloud produced by the powerful blast rained down huge amounts of nuclear radiation. It contaminated the island and spread to other still inhabited islands.

It also contaminated all of the ships in the area. Scientists sent there to monitor the radiation found levels much higher than expected. They realized that it was not safe for the sailors to work on the ships there after the blast. After days of working in high levels of nuclear radiation, the sailors were evacuated from the area. The ships had to be abandoned or sunk.

The islanders were not able to return home. Radiation had contaminated the soil of their islands. This meant that food grown on the islands would not be safe to eat. Still, the arms race continued. Both the United States and the Soviet Union built bigger and bigger nuclear bombs, some as powerful as 1,500 Hiroshima bombs. At the time, both countries felt that the bombs kept them safe from attack. After many years, some of the Bikini islanders tried to return home. It was still not safe, and they had to leave once again. Many of them are still exiles.

Gradually, people began to realize that the arms race was just too dangerous. They began to think of other ways to keep their countries safe. Countries made treaties in which both sides agreed to reduce their stockpile of nuclear weapons. There are still many nuclear weapons on the Earth, but the arms race between the U.S. and the Soviets has finally ended.

It has now been over 50 years since the nuclear weapons testing at Bikini Atoll, and to this day, the soil on the islands is contaminated with radiation.