

## THE PROPOSED AIRFIELD IN TRUK

KANDHI ELIEISAR  
JOHN FALMED  
BERNARD RAYPHAND  
MARTIN GORONG  
LESTER MURITOK

### INTRODUCTION

The Trust Territory Government is currently considering a proposal that the present 5,100-foot airport in Truk be extended to approximately 6,100 feet long and 150 feet wide, including 200 feet safety areas on each end of the runway. The proposed extension project will involve the installment of lighting, fencing, and paving. In addition, the project will also involve the dredging of about 40 acres of lagoon to enable the airport to move seaward. The total allocation of money contributed for the extension project is \$16.4 million.

The extension project of the runway has been delayed because the Iras landowners oppose it. The Iras landowners have rights on the airport's land which is being held by the government under an indefinite lease agreement. The Iras landowners protest has set off a three year controversy over the issue of the runway. Many people are involved including some of the most important political leaders in the district.

Our primary purpose then, is to present the main issues that divide the people (especially Iras landowners) and the government over the extension project. We hope to give whatever background may be necessary for an understanding of the controversy over the airfield.

To help us achieve our prime objectives, we conducted a background survey of the proposed airport issue. We first went to the Legislature Building, where we obtained documents on the resolutions related to the proposal. We interviewed the Speaker, Koichy Sana, Legislative Aid, Hernak Paul, and other legislators. We then went to the Micronesian Legal Services Office where we interviewed attorney, Michael DeAngelo. Afterward, we went to the Distad's Office and obtained information on the government's part from the Deputy Distad, Erhart Aten. We also went to the Land Commission Office for background of the land lease arrangement, and then proceeded to the Planning Office, where we interviewed Vincent McGurl, and were given four cassettes of the public hearing. Later, we went to the Continental Air Micronesia Office, and obtained needed information on the airport's situation. We concluded

our survey by interviewing the traditional leaders of Mechitiw and Iras, a sample of Iras people, (especially land owners), and various concerned people such as the Mayor of Moen, Fuchita Bossy, the chief of Iras, Camilo Noket and Dr. Thomas F. King, an archeologist, studying the effects of the extension project on historical sites. For the help given us, we would like to express our sincere thanks and appreciation to all concerned.

#### IRAS VILLAGE

Iras is the second largest village on Moen. It is situated on the northern part of the island, extending from the northeast end of the runway to the public works facilities. It is well-known for the airport and its urban features, having popular private bars, stores and some government facilities (see map on page 10).

Iras has many sub-cultural groups, who migrated from their home islands to stay on Moen. These clusters of people are from the Philippines, Namoneas, Faichuk, the Mortlocks and the Westerns. These are the migrants living in Iras - by "migrants" we mean people whose parents or who themselves were born on islands other than Moen.

Iras has an estimated population of 1,496 according to the 1973 census. The population has increased in 1977 to an estimated 1,546. Out of the total 1973 population, there were 1,099 migrants a number which increased in 1977 to 1,244. On the other hand, there were 252 original citizens of Iras in 1973 and they increased in 1977 to 447.

The village of Iras is crowded. The people are living very close to each other for they had lost their lands to the government and to the migrants. They were forced to move into poor living quarters.

#### HISTORY OF THE ISSUE

The idea of extending the airport was first proposed in 1962. The government recognized that a new airport would improve the economic development of Truk, as well as the whole Trust Territory.

The issue of the extended airport was under consideration when the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) made a study of the existing 5,100-foot runway in 1968. Considering the feasibility of its extension, the FAA agreed to the project and made a contribution of approximately \$1.4 million. The Department of Interior invested \$10.9 million, including a small grant from the Congress of Micronesia. Funds from other unknown sources brought the total amount to \$16.4 million, enough for a 6,000-foot runway instead of the 9,000-foot runway that was originally envisioned.

Even this more modest proposal was regarded as an important improvement. The present airfield lacks fencing, which means the runway is open to animals, people, and debris. The existing 5,100-foot runway is not paved and not long enough to insure safe landings for the 727 jets. It is very close to the nearby Iras village, and noise and dust during landings affect the people living there. However, proposed improvements will solve the present problems. There will be fencing and paving to lessen the pollution and to insure safety of the runway. Moreover, it will be long enough to insure safe landings, both day and night. To lessen the noise impact, the new airfield will be moved out, further seaward.

By early 1975, the High Commissioner wanted to take immediate action on the matter. He informed the Truk Administration to get the people's approval of the new airfield, but the issue was delayed due to objections from the people, especially the people of Iras Village. Most of the airport land is private; only 12% of it is public land. These private lands are under indefinite lease to the government. The people wanted to renegotiate the leases with the government. They wanted to change the indefinite leases to definite leases, but the government refused to renegotiate.

The High Commissioner made a proposal to the Truk District Legislature to settle the problems of the people. That same year, the Legislature considered the proposal in its First Special Session but it was tabled due to the government's failure to show the terms of settling the people's problems. The High Commissioner made a second proposal to the Legislature. The proposal was given to the Economic Committee for consideration. The Economic Committee made a study of it and reported its findings to the 25th Regular Session, 2nd Special Session in June 1975. The proposed resolution was turned down due to still unclear information and especially to objections from the people of Iras and Mechitiw, who were present. The third proposal was introduced in May 1976 and was assigned to a special committee. The committee reported its findings to the body which was acted upon in the 26th Regular Session, and was passed due to the promise made by the government to support the runway issue and to solve the problems of the people of Iras.

The High Commissioner sent an application to the Corps of Engineers for a permit, which would enable the construction of the runway to begin. On January 18, 1978 the Corps of Engineers had a public hearing, purposefully held to explore the various problems of the people. The Corps of Engineers also made a survey in which they studied the environmental problems and assessed the feasibility of the airfield. The result of their survey is in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), which is positive on the extension project. At present the government is still waiting for the issue of the Army Permit.

However, the introduction of the airport's extension was accompanied by opposition from the people of Iras, due to government's failure to directly contact them before going further into the issue. In 1974, the

people of Iras made their first demonstration led by their leader, Camilo Noket. They blocked off the adjacent road at Iras to manifest their disapproval of the government's dealings with them. Their main reason was that the government didn't live up to its promises to install water sources and other useful things as part of the compensation made earlier, when the airport was constructed.

Two additional demonstrations were made concerning the extension project. Again the demonstrations were led by Camilo Noket. One of the demonstrations took place in 1975 in the District Legislature Building, where the people violently complained that before the airport project be approved, the government must deal first with their problems. And the last demonstration of about 200 people took place in the Airport in 1977. They all brought leaflets symbolizing that they have land rights, that ought to be considered seriously by the Government.

In addition to the demonstrations, there was one official public hearing conducted, as we have mentioned, by the Army Corps of Engineers for the people to voice their various objections. Large numbers of Iras people and landowners attended the hearing. There were about 23 witnesses, 3 of whom spoke out in favor and 20 of whom spoke out against the proposed airfield. The major issues in the public hearing were the historical sites and the dredging areas. The people who spoke favorably of the issue were mostly from the government's part. On the other hand, most of the people who spoke unfavorably, were from Iras and Mechitiw. The people who spoke against the issue manifested a strong desire to hold onto the historical sites, because they represent their identity and values, as well as symbolizing their ancestral origins.

#### HISTORY OF THE LANDS

In mid-1930's the people of Iras abandoned their lands under the command of the Japanese, without compensation, and took up residence in Tunnuk. The Japanese turned most of the level portion of their lands into the runway, which still exists today. Large portions of the land beside the runway were occupied by the Japanese Force. Under the Japanese Administration, the Iras people were never allowed to use their lands; nor were they ever compensated for their lands.

Just after the war, in 1945, the U.S. Navy took over the lands. The Navy increased the dimension of the runway, taking more land from the Iras people. In 1948, the people of Iras were allowed to return to their lands. The return was not simple, because most of the level land was occupied by the Navy. The people faced difficulties in settling down. They were forced to settle down in the swampy areas along the runway, the only land left for them to use. They crowded along the runway, and against the mountain side. That is where they are found today, caught between the runway and the mountain. The compensation that these people obtained for their lands from the Navy was minor and included such things as cigarettes and candy. In 1948, the Navy left and the

District Government moved in and started using the lands. The government used the runway and the other portion of the lands for public facilities such as the police station, the public work areas, the power plant, the new sewage plant, the Legislature buildings, the Broadcasting station, the quarry area, etc.

In 1952, the government made an indefinite land use agreement with the owners of the lands in the existing runway. Under the agreement, a partial payment of between \$150 and \$350 per acre/per year (depending on the value of the lands) was paid in a lump sum to the owners. In addition, an annual rental fee of 6% of the partial payment was paid for the next 10 years. The lease would continue for ten years, until 1962. It was stated in the agreement that the lands should be returned to the owners if not in use.

In our interviews with them, most of the land owners stated that the government had not paid the full amount of compensation. The land owners claim that they were never fairly compensated for their lands. According to our interviews, one woman claimed that she was paid only \$20 to \$30, but her land was much bigger and more valuable. They also claimed that the agreement made with the government in 1952 was unfair. They didn't comprehend the terms of the agreement. Nevertheless, the government stated that the land owners misunderstood the payment because they thought that each would be given an equal amount. The agreement stated that compensation depended on the value and the size of the land.

#### THE ISSUES AS THEY ARE STATED

##### For the Proposed Airfield

According to FAA studies of the present runway in Truk, the airport is not long enough to guarantee safety. To meet this objective, the government is planning to extend the present runway by approximately 1,000 feet, and additionally add 200 feet safety areas at each end of the runway (see map on page 11). According to reliable sources, the additional length would sufficiently increase the safety of all passengers and crew landing and departing at the runway. It would also enhance the relative safety of any person living in the area immediately adjacent to the runway.

Paving. FAA originally classified the present runway as compacted coral, "due to the deterioration of the coral". The FAA reports stated that the presence of loose particles creates an inordinate risk both of particles being blown into the eyes of bystanders and of particles being forced into the jet's engine by their intake. However, the government is planning to pave the runway to lessen the problem of pollution and to insure safety of planes.

More Flights. The new runway will improve the services of airlines into Truk. Planes with greater cargo capacity will rarely overfly Truk. There will be more flights both day and night.

More Cargo. The increase of flights will contribute to a greater increase of cargo capacity. The present runway is not sufficient for a plane to be fully loaded by passengers and cargo due to its poor condition. Planes can only take 53% of the maximum load, or a total of 86 passengers and no cargo. According to our interview with a pilot, the overall weight that a plane could carry is 150,000 pounds depending on the condition of the runway and weather. If the runway were to be enlarged, the weight could be increased to 92% of the maximum payload, which is far more economically feasible than the present maximum load.

More Tourists. The number of people visiting Micronesia will also increase. Thus, the economy will increase. For the past year of 1977, the number of foreign visitors entering Micronesia was increased by 16% over the number in 1976. And Truk shared in the 1977 annual increase up to 34%, ranking second in Micronesia in tourism to the Marianas District. It is estimated and predicted that in the coming years, there would be more tourists. This amount would double the annual increase of Truk's tourists to about 68%, increasing the overall contribution of money in Micronesia.

Noise. The noise impact, especially, will increase when there are more flights at day and night. However, the government is trying to meet this by moving the runway out further seaward so that the borderline of the new runway will be on the center line of the present runway. The distance will be 750 feet away from the village which is more adequate to lessen the noise impact upon the dwellers.

#### Against the Proposed Airfield

The initiation of the proposed airfield brought about disruptions to the people of Truk, especially to the land owners of Iras. Although additional places are involved in the conflict - such as Fono, Tunnuk, Mwan, and Mechitiw, - our emphasis will be on the people of Iras Village.

Renegotiation. There are about 40 people who leased their lands to the government. The leasers were mostly from Iras Village. We learned that there are about 96 acres or 70 parcels of land being held by the government under the indefinite use agreement. The average parcel to each land owner is about 2 acres. From 1962 until now, no compensation has been given out, due to the termination of the agreement. The land owners complained that the government didn't fairly compensate them. According to our interview with land owners, they said that the government didn't pay the full amount of \$300 per acre/ per year. They also mentioned that they were surprised when the pay-

ment ended due to a great misunderstanding. For this reason, the land owners demand that the government renegotiate with them and also pay past compensation. Their demands for past compensation range from \$6,600 to \$10,000. When we interviewed the chief, Camilo Noket, he mentioned that he wanted \$6,600 for past compensation from 1956 till 1978. It was true that they had interpreters during the "Big Pay Off", but they mentioned that not even the interpreters comprehended the legal meaning of the terms "indefinite period" or "perpetual right". Unless the government settles this problems, the land owners will never agree to the extension of the project.

Fishing Sources. The people of Iras Village are also objecting to the extension project because of the dredging. The dredging will destroy fishing sources and sea medicine and also kill the reef which will affect the sea life. Besides, the dredging will turn the shallow water into a 60 to 120 foot depth which will make the traditional methods of fishing impossible. There will also be a strong current and beach erosion, which will destroy the shore.

The people of Mechitiw also manifested strong opposition in this matter of dredging. According to these people, they depend on the nearby reef for fishing. They mentioned that the reef is very useful because it is accessible for fishing and recreation. In the same way, the dredging will cause beach erosion and current affecting the houses near the shoreline.

Recreation. The Iras people sometimes use the place for recreation, especially playing games and swimming. However, this could be done only in shallow water. The dredging will hinder the possibilities of recreation.

Historical Sites. Mt. Tonachaw had been registered in the National Registry as a historical site. Tonachaw is very important to the people of Iras Village because it was traditionally considered as a meeting place for all the great chiefs. Thus, the people are against the building of beacons on the mountain, which they claim will ruin the historical sites.

The people of Mechitiw are against the dredging because it will ruin one of the historical sites, a passage called Tawanap. According to the people of Mechitiw, Tawanap is very important because their ancestors originally came from Ponape through the pass, and the place symbolizes their traditional identity and values. Therefore, the dredging will mean taking away the traditional values and identity.

#### WHAT IS BEHIND THE STATED ISSUE

The Truk District Government recognizes that a new runway is a step towards modernization. By modernization we mean having modern facilities and more prestige. A new runway will improve more than

just the island's economy. It will also create a new raised society. This will enable Truk District to take a step further towards "progress", toward improving the standard of living in this 20th century. The proposed runway which costs \$16.4 million is really a gift to the Truk District Government. The government is trying to make use of the money and is pushing the extension project to take place regardless of the feelings of the minority group (Iras people). The government feels that it is not good for the minority group to impair the project because it is for the good of the people of Truk as a whole. The government feels that it must go ahead with the project regardless of the feelings of the people. Moreover, the government feels that if the other districts are in a race towards modernization, Truk has to move forward rather than backward to keep in pace. The government wants to enter the modernized world.

Many people have expressed different feelings towards the runway extension. Most government people are in favor of the extension project with the exception of a few who sympathize with the complaints of the ordinary people. These few government people are against the project because they value the traditional identity of the lands and the historical sites that the people have. It is not that they don't want modernization, but they insist on preserving the traditional values and identity which is their heritage. They feel that there should be a balance between modernization and traditionalism.

The Iras people want money for their land-but they want more than that. They are seemingly the most unfortunate people among the various sub-cultural groups of people dwelling in the village. They have suffered under the Japanese Administration, U.S. Navy and now the T.T. Government. These people who were formerly residing near the seashore are now dwelling at the base of the nearby mountain, in swampy areas and in taro patches. They have lost much of their lands to the government and to the migrants living there.

The village is very crowded. Large portion of the Iras Village is occupied by outer islanders, foreigners, and the government facilities. The outsiders do not participate in the village council; hence, the chief can't maintain authority over them and their lands.

From all the physical changes which have taken and are taking place, the people of Iras seem frustrated and bitter. We find that deep inside these people lies a great fear of losing their lands, their traditional identity and values. Micronesians' identity is in the land because it marks the origin and history of a clan. The proposed runway is a symbol of encroachment upon them and their lands. The people are motivated to fight desperately against another attempt from the government to take what was once theirs.

SUMMARY

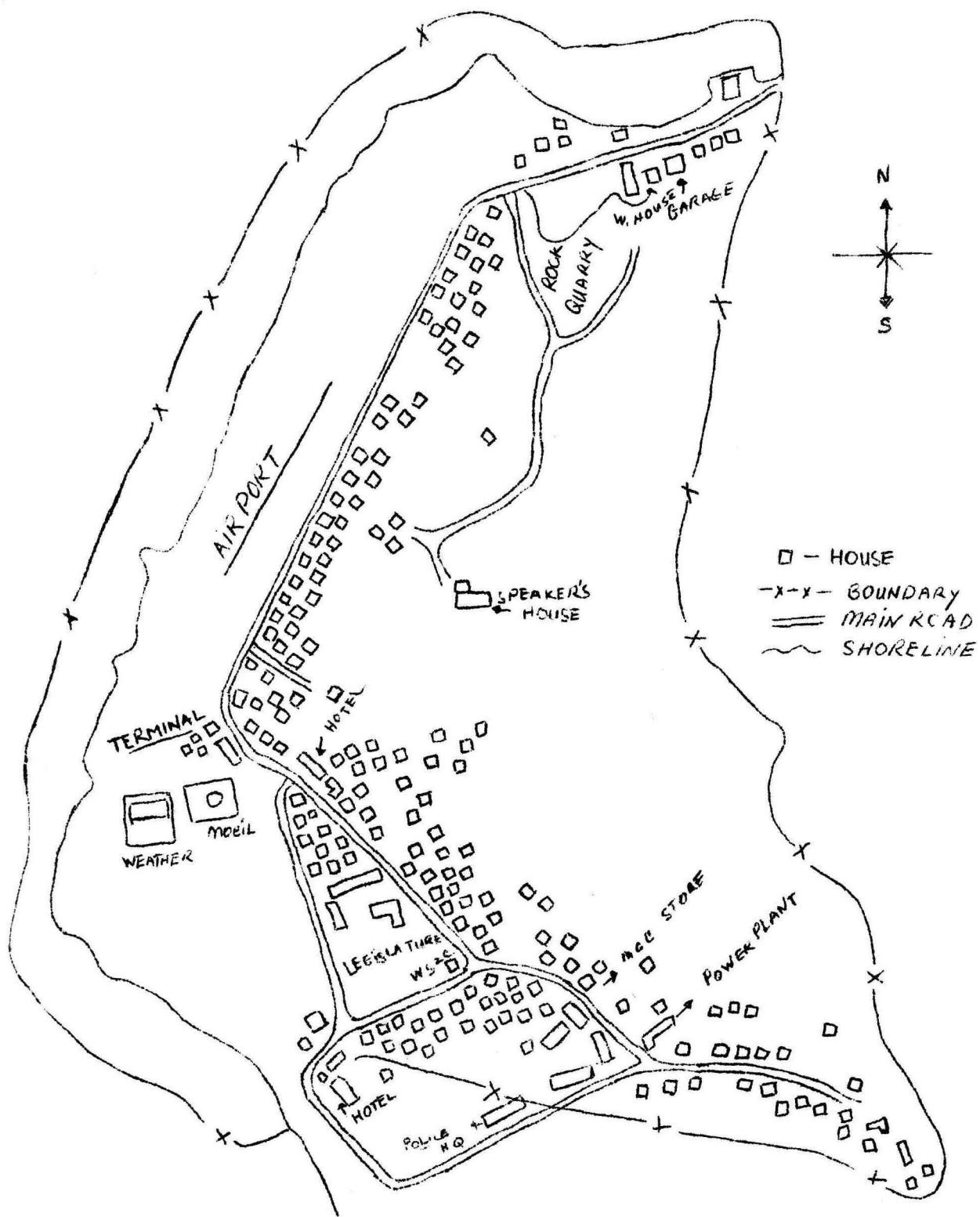
Up to the present, the government has not taken any action to resolve the objections of the Iras people. The government has refused to enter into negotiations with these people. It has failed to critically consider the objections and demands of the people. However, the government has settled some of the objections leading to the extension project namely, pollution, noise and safety measures. The remaining problems are centered on the historical sites, the dredging and the indefinite lease agreement. These are considered to be the leading issues of the people that hinder the project.

The government seems to have no intention of dealing with the objections of the people. The government is waiting for the Army permit and the approval of the archeological studies. Once these two are gotten, the project will start regardless of the various problems. On the other hand, the Iras people are now waiting for the government to answer their demands. They want the government to settle the indefinite land use agreement, and the effect of the dredging on the historical sites and on their resources. Although some do favor the extension project, they want the government to settle their objections first before proceeding with the project. However, if the problems are not solved, the people will not agree to the project and their only option will be to sue the government.

The people of Mechitiw also play an important role in the critical issue of the runway extension. They object to the proposed dredging due to the resulting consequences.

The Trust Territory Government considers the whole matter as a serious problem and is demanding that the problems be solved before 1980. However, if the problems are not solved by 1980, the proposed project would be cancelled and the \$16.4 million would be withdrawn for the other districts. Therefore, the only hope for the future is that the problems be solved to enable the project to begin. However, the hopes run deeper for, it is the hope of many people that, if approved, the new airport will bring many benefits to Truk and to the whole of Micronesia, as well.

MAP OF IRAS VILLAGE



MAP OF THE TRUK AIRFIELD (EXISTING AND PROPOSED AIRFIELD)

