



UPR of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, 2025

UPR pre-sessional briefing

Human rights and the legacy of nuclear testing

Words of introduction

Nearly 80 years since the first of 67 nuclear test explosions were carried out above ground and underwater in Bikini and Enewetak atolls, entire atolls remain uninhabitable and the legacy of devastating environmental and health problems across the Marshall Islands continue

Since the last UPR, efforts to implement several recommendations relating to rights to health and to a clean and healthy environment, include the Government's initiative of two Human Rights Council resolutions on the nuclear legacy in their country - *51/35 of 2022, and 57/26 of 2024*, which were adopted by the HRC. (*on "Technical assistance and capacity-building to address the human rights implications of the nuclear legacy in the Marshall Islands"*,) We welcome these and the work of OHCHR to provide the necessary support. (slide 2)

In November 2023, my organisation carried out a visit to the country in follow up to this resolution, and in continuation of the on-going expression of solidarity and support by the WCC to the churches and people of the Marshall Islands. We met with church partners, Government, and civil society actors as well as elderly survivors from the most affected atolls – all of whom expressed a desire to return to their homes, 80 years since they were forced to leave.

Right to a clean and healthy environment

Concerning the right to a clean and healthy environment; At the last UPR in 2020, four recommendations¹ - from China, Belarus, Chile, and Iran - called upon the Marshall Islands to take further measures to address the long-term damage to the environment. Of particular concern to the Marshallese as well as scientists around the world are fear that the concrete dome on Runit Island, Enewetak Atoll, under which the US buried approximately 80,000 cubic metres of radioactive waste, is starting to crack, releasing its contents into the Pacific Ocean. A natural disaster brought on by climate change could tear the dome wide open.

Recommendations (slide 3)

The Government should continue with its requests of the support of the international community to resource and enable independent research to assess the continuing levels of radiation contamination – particularly with respect to the concrete dome - and to develop national capacity to detect and respond to toxic, radioactive and climate related threats to the environment.

¹ China 106.46, Belarus 106.91, Chile 106.92, Iran 106.94

The Government should continue to call upon the US to fully declassify the heavily redacted documents concerning the extent of radioactive and other contamination throughout the country. (1.45)

The Government must sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, without further delay. This has not yet happened due to their stated concerns “that the Treaty would wrongfully place the disproportionately heavy burden of victim assistance and remediation on countries affected by nuclear testing instead of on those responsible for carrying out the tests in the first place.”²

We consider that this interpretation of the Treaty is incorrect. Articles 6 and 7 would in fact support the efforts of the Marshall Islands to seek victim assistance from other States parties without negating the primary responsibility of the US to provide full compensation to the survivors of nuclear testing and those who continue to be affected to this day, and to provide environmental remediation.

Right to Health

On the closely connected issue of *the right to health*; at the last UPR, three recommendations (from Fiji, 106.93, Iran 106.95, Malaysia, 106.96) called for the expansion of the national cancer prevention programme³, noting the disproportionate impact of nuclear testing on women’s health.

Efforts to implement UPR recommendations are evident, despite the limited available resources. The Cancer Centre in Majuro hospital in the capital, encourages people to be checked for cancers and then works with those who receive a diagnosis. High rates of cancers associated with radiation, including thyroid cancer, breast cancer and leukaemia were reported throughout the country. In 2023, staff from the Cancer Centre reported that the programme was impacted by Covid in 2020, and they had not been able to get outside Majuro since then.

The forced relocations of communities from the four most affected atolls Bikini, Rongelap, Enewetak and Utrik, sometimes to islands which had no lagoon or edible trees and crops growing there, disrupted the traditional reliance on fishing and subsistence farming. Communities have remained heavily reliant on imported canned and processed food, which has led to high rates of heart disease.

Recommendations (slide 4)

The Government should take all possible measures to reach out for international cooperation and assistance to ensure that access to quality and affordable health care – particularly to cancer care – is made available within RMI and to areas outside the capital Majuro.

The recommendation from Haiti for “concrete and quantifiable measures necessary to promote more nutritious, diversified and healthy diets, as well as active lifestyles, in particular by improving food education”, remains valid.⁴

Measures must be taken to address the high cost of imported food, on which much of the country has become dependent. In addition, parents need to understand the importance of a nutritious diet for their children, and be paid salaries which can cover the costs of nutritious food.

² <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/46/14>. Page 3

³ Fiji, 106.93, Iran 106.95, Malaysia, 106.96

⁴ Haiti 106.88

Right to Education and Information

The level of knowledge of the Marshallese about the history of the nuclear tests in their country, and hence their capacity to advocate for reparations and remediation, has been limited by the history of secrecy and stigma against those most directly affected. Many young Marshallese only hear about (2.33) their country's past when they go away to school, and then their journey to engage in advocacy about it begins.

Important efforts are being made to ensure that young people are aware of their country's past, particularly by the National Nuclear Commission which speaks to children and young people in schools and educational institutions. The access to this knowledge for those people living further away from Majuro is more limited, given the inaccessibility and remoteness of many of the atolls which make up RMI.

Recommendations (slide 5)

Measures should be taken to include the nuclear history of RMI throughout the national education curriculum, and teachers must be supported to share this history.

The Government should continue with efforts to share the story of the legacy of nuclear testing with the international community, to address the global knowledge gap and lack of awareness about the nuclear history of the RMI.

Post statement comments

The lack of international presence of organisations – particularly for health – was striking.

The resilience and creativity of the Marshallese in living with the legacy in their lands and waters was remarkable.

The Government is to be commended for its continuing advocacy in various international forums, to seek justice and reparations for its people, to call for technical and scientific support to address the ongoing environmental concerns, and to ensure that this situation – which constitutes one of the most serious human rights situations perpetrated against an entire nation in the last century – is not forgotten.

We can look at images on the map, tiny strips of land on the other side of the world, but for the Marshall Islanders these images are their home and everything that home should represent, including being a place of safety.