BRAVO and Today: US Nuclear Tests in the Marshall Islands

Tony de Brum, Lolelaplap Trust

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It is an honor for me to be able to speak to you today on behalf of indigenous people throughout the world whose lives have been dramatically affected by the proliferation of weapons. I bring you the greetings of the people of the Marshall Islands, and more specifically the paramount leaders of the Ralik chain, Iroijlaplap Imata Kabua, and Iroijlaplap Anjua Loeak, whose domains have borne the brunt of United States military weapons development – from the nuclear bombs of the Cold War to the missiles that carry them today.

I lived on the island of Likiep in the northern Marshalls for the entire 12 years of the US atomic and thermonuclear testing program in my country. I witnessed most of the detonations, and was just 9-years old when I experienced the most horrific of these explosions, the infamous BRAVO shot that terrorized our community and traumatized our society to an extent that few people in the world can imagine.

While BRAVO was by far the most dramatic test, all 67 of the shots detonated in the Marshall Islands contributed one way or another to the nuclear legacy that haunts us to this day. As one of our legal advisors has described it, if one were to take the total yield of the nuclear weapons tested in the Marshall Islands and spread them out over time, we would have the equivalent of 1.6 Hiroshima shots, every day for twelve years.

But the Marshall Islands' encounter with the bomb did not end with the detonations themselves. In recent years, documents released by the United States government have uncovered even more horrific aspects of the Marshallese burden borne in the name of international peace and security. US government documents clearly demonstrate that its scientists conducted human radiation experiments with Marshallese citizens. Some of our people were injected with or coerced to drink fluids laced with radiation. Other experimentation involved the purposeful and premature resettlement of people on islands highly contaminated by the weapons tests to study how human beings absorb radiation from their foods and environment. Much of this human experimentation occurred in populations either exposed to near lethal amounts of radiation, or to "control" populations who were told they would receive medical "care" for participating in these studies to help their fellow citizens. At the conclusion of all these studies, the United States still maintained that no positive linkage can be established between the tests and the health status of the Marshallese. Just in the past few weeks, a new US government study has predicted higher than 50% higher than expected incidence of cancer in the Marshall Islands

resulting from the atomic tests.

Although the testing of the atomic and thermonuclear weapons ended 48 years ago, we still have entire populations living in social disarray. The people of Rongelap Atoll, the inhabited island closest to the ground zero locations, remain in exile in their own country. I might also add that although the people of Rongelap were evacuated by the US government for earlier smaller weapons tests, the US government purposefully decided not to evacuate them prior to the detonation of the BRAVO event – a thermonuclear weapon designed to be the largest device ever detonated by the United States. The people of Rongelap were known to be in harms way but were not warned about BRAVO in advance and had no ability or knowledge of how to protect themselves or reduce their exposure.

Throughout the years, America's nuclear history in the Marshall Islands has been colored with official denial, self-serving control of information, and abrogation of commitment to redress the shameful wrongs done to the Marshallese people. The scientists and military officials involved in the testing program picked and chose their study subjects, recognized certain communities as exposed when it served their interests, and denied monitoring and medical attention to subgroups within the Marshall Islands. I remember well their visits to my village in Likiep where they subjected every one of us to tests and invasive physical examinations which, as late as 1978, they denied ever carrying out. In later years when I was a public servant for the RMI I raised the issue requesting that raw data gathered during these visits be made available to us. United States representatives responded by saying that our recollections were juvenile and did not consider the public health missions of the time.

For decades, the US government has utilized slick mathematical and statistical representations to dismiss the occurrence of exotic anomalies, including malformed fetuses, and abnormal appearances of diseases in so called "unexposed areas," as coincidental and not attributable to radiation exposure. We have been told repeatedly, for example, that our birthing anomalies are the result of incest or a gene pool that is too small – anything but the radiation. These explanations are offensive, and obviously wrong since these abnormalities certainly did not occur before we became the proving ground for US nuclear weapons. Selective referral of Marshallese patients to different military hospitals in the United States and its territories also made it easier for the US government to dismiss linkages between medical problems and radiation exposure. The several unexplained fires that led to the destruction of numerous records and medical charts for the patients with the most acute radiation illnesses further underscores this point. In spite of all these studies and findings, we were told that positive linkage was still impossible because of what they called "statistical insignificance."

I have been a student of the horrific impacts of the nuclear weapons testing program for most of my life. I served as interpreter for American officials who proclaimed Bikini safe for resettlement and commenced a program to repatriate the Bikini people who for decades barely survived on the secluded island of Kili. I accompanied the American High Commissioner of the Trust Territory just a few years later to once again remove the repatriated residents from Bikini because their exposure had become too high for the US government's comfort. I was also personally involved in the translation of the Enewetak Environmental Impact Statement that declared Enewetak safe for resettlement. I voiced my doubts in a television interview at the time by describing the US public relations efforts associated with the Enewetak clean-up as a dog-and-pony show. Later, during negotiations to end the trust territory arrangement with the United States, we discovered that certain

scientific information regarding Enewetak was being withheld from us because, as the official US government memorandum stated, "the Marshallese negotiators might make overreaching demands" on the United States if the facts about the extent of damage in the islands were known to us.

The outcome of our negotiations was the end of the United Nations Trusteeship and a treaty, which, among other things, provided for the ongoing responsibilities of our former trustee for the communities impacted by the nuclear weapons tests. This assistance provided by the US government for radiation damages and injuries is based on a US government study that purports to be the best and most accurate knowledge about the effects of radiation in the Marshall Islands. Our agreement to terminate our United Nations trusteeship that the US government administered was based largely on those assurances. We have since discovered that even that covenant by the United States was false. Today, not only is the US government backpedaling on this issue but its official position as enunciated by the current administration is to flee its responsibilities to the Marshall Islands for the severe nuclear damages and injuries perpetrated upon them.

After spending decades of my life trying to persuade the US government to take responsibility for the full range of damages and injuries caused by the testing of 67 atmospheric atomic and thermonuclear weapons in the Marshall Islands, a new global arms system arrived at the door of the Marshall Islands. After years of ICBM testing, the Marshall Islands now has the dubious distinction of hosting the US government's missile shield testing program. The US government shoots Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) at the Marshall Islands. From an area leased by the US Army on Kwajalein Atoll, the Ronald Reagan Missile Defense Test Site, the US launches interceptor missiles at the incoming ICBMs to test the ability of these interceptors to track and destroy incoming missiles. These tests impact every aspect of our lives… from the local people who are relocated from their homes, to the whales, sea turtles, and birds that have lived in harmony with human beings in our region of the world for centuries.

As history repeats itself in the Marshall Islands, the people of Kwajalein have been removed from their homelands, crowded into unbearable living squalor on a 56-acre island with 18,000 residents called Ebeye. This is the equivalent of taking everyone here in Manhattan and forcing them to live on the ground floor – can you imagine the density of Manhattan if there were no skyscrapers? The US Army base depends on Ebeye for housing its indigenous labor force, but the US Army has also erected impenetrable boundaries keeping the Marshallese at arm's length; Marshallese on the island adjacent to the US base are unable to use the world-class hospital in emergencies, to fill water bottles during times of drought, or to purchase basic food supplies when cargo ships are delayed. One does not have to be a rocket scientist to suspect that the lands, lagoon, and surrounding seas of Kwajalein, are being damaged from depleted uranium and other substances. Unfortunately, our efforts to seek a clear understanding of the consequences of the missile testing program – data we need to make informed decisions regarding our future or the prerequisite rehabilitation of our lands before repatriation – have been spurned by the United States government. Perchlorate additives in the missiles fired from Kwajalein have been detected in the soil and the water lenses but to date no real data has become available for meaningful, independent study. The lands leased by the United States military are compensated far below market. Efforts by the Kwajalein leadership to deal with the realities which face them when the current agreement expires in 2016 have been largely ignored as the US openly and callously discusses the uses of our lands beyond 2016 and into 2086…all without our consent. Our

Constitution specifically prohibits the taking of land without consent or proper compensation.

We call upon the international community to extend its hands to assist the people of the Marshall Islands to extricate themselves from the legacy of the nuclear age and the burden of providing testing grounds for weapons of mass destruction. In the countries that produce these weapons we have come together to protest, if a person's land or resources become contaminated, persons so affected have the option to buy another house and move elsewhere. For indigenous people it is not that simple. Our land and waters are sacred to us. Our land and waters embody our culture, our traditions, our kinship ties, our social structures, and our ability to take care of ourselves. Our lands are irreplaceable.

When we talk about the importance of non-proliferation of weapons we also must include in our discourse the essential non-proliferation of illness, forced relocation, and social and cultural ills in the indigenous communities that pay disproportionately for the adverse consequences resulting from the process, deployment, and storage of weapons. A relatively small number of world leaders and decision-makers do not have the right to destroy the well-being and livelihood of any society, whether large or small, in the name of global security. Security for indigenous people means healthy land, resources and body – not the presence of weapons and the dangers they engender. Global leaders do not have, nor should they be allowed to assume the right, to take my security away so that they may feel more secure themselves.

MAY PEACE BE WITH YOU.

Thank you.

Tony de Brum delivered this address on behalf of Indigenous People throughout the world to the Seventh Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference at the United Nations on May 11, 2005. Posted at Japan Focus May 19, 2005.

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