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The long road to nuclear justice for the Marshallese people

By Olivia Paschal

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Members of the Reverse the Trend group for Marshallese high schoolers in Springdale, Arkansas, work on a painting of the Castle Bravo nuclear test. (Photo courtesy of Benetick Maddison/**Marshallese Educational Initiative**.)

The largest nuclear weapon ever detonated by the United States went off on the evacuated Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands on March 1, 1954.* Nearly a thousand times the strength of the atomic bombs that the U.S. dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed hundreds of thousands of people,

Castle Bravo was one of 67 nuclear weapons tested by the U.S. military in and around the Pacific Island chain from 1946 to 1958.

At the time, the United Nations had given the U.S. administrative authority over the Marshalls, 29 coral atolls made up of 1,156 individual islands and islets. The U.S. **had responsibility** for, among other things, guarding the health of the islands' inhabitants and protecting them against loss of land and resources.

But the U.S. testing resulted in entire islands vaporized and others rendered uninhabitable due to radioactive fallout, displacing thousands of Marshallese people – many of whom out of necessity now live in the country whose government uprooted them from their homes, but where they are not citizens. The radioactive fallout from the tests **led to** cancer, birth defects, and diseases and chronic health conditions that persist today. The one atoll the U.S. attempted to clean up, Enewetak, still has millions of cubic square feet of radioactive waste – including lethal plutonium – housed in a concrete structure called Runit Dome that's **threatened by rising seas** from climate change. And 75 years after the nuclear testing began, the U.S. has still not publicly released all the information it has about its extent or effects.

"We were all alone," said Benetick Kabua Maddison, the project specialist for nuclear legacy and climate issues at the Marshallese Educational Initiative (MEI), a nonprofit based in Springdale, Arkansas. "Nobody stood with us, mainly because the United States didn't want anybody to know about it."

Springdale is home to an **estimated** 12,000 Marshallese people, believed to be the second-largest community of Marshallese outside the islands themselves. Many moved to the area beginning in the late 1980s to work in poultry-processing facilities, an industry **hit hard** by the COVID-19 pandemic over the past year. A Compact of Free Association (COFA) **signed** by the U.S. and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) that took effect in 1986, when the country gained its independence, allows Marshallese to travel back and forth from and work in the U.S. without special visas, a status shared only with the people of the other Pacific Island nations of Palau and Micronesia.

On March 1 of this year, MEI and several other organizations, including the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, hosted a **virtual event** for National Nuclear Remembrance Day, which is commemorated yearly by the RMI on the anniversary of the Bravo test. Emceed by Maddison, the event featured Marshallese leaders in Springdale talking about the community's continued struggle to access health care and basic services in the U.S. In addition, researchers spoke about the continued impacts of radioactive fallout and displacement due to the testing. Students from Reverse the Trend, a club led by Maddison at a Springdale school, **presented** artwork they made reflecting on the trauma their elders experienced from nuclear weapons, and their own identities as displaced people.



A painting of the Castle Bravo nuclear test, the largest and most powerful nuclear weapons test ever conducted by the United States, by Marshallese high school students in Springdale, Arkansas, who are part of the Reverse the Trend club. (Photo courtesy of Benetick Kabua Maddison/**Marshallese Educational Initiative**.)

"I can't imagine losing your home and trying to find a place to replace it – but in truth, you cannot, because you lost it," said Joyce, one of the students featured in the **video**. Her art includes a portrait of her grandmother, one of those displaced to make room for the U.S. to conduct its nuclear tests.

"The land is basically the foundation of our culture, it's our identity," said Maddison. "We feel like if we lose it, then we lose a huge part of who we are. We don't want to be homeless because we have seen the impact of what it feels like to lose home for Native Americans, for our indigenous brothers and sisters across the world."

A lack of disclosure

When U.S. military personnel **arrived** on Bikini Atoll in 1946, they **told** the more than 160 Bikinians they were removing from the island that their relocation and the use of their home for testing bombs was "for the good of all mankind." When radioactive fallout from the Bravo test drifted hundreds of miles to the inhabited atolls of Rongelap and Rongelik, the U.S. did not evacuate the islands or tell the Marshallese inhabitants what the material falling from the sky was **until two days later** – after children had played in it and eaten it, thinking it was snow. The radioactive fallout poisoned them as well as adults. Women who had been exposed to the fallout gave birth to children without bones and with transparent skin, **known as** "jellyfish babies."

The U.S. also did not tell those who were exposed that they were part of Project 4.1, a federal government study looking at radiation exposure's effects on humans. The study was done without the Marshallese participants' informed consent.

"I had no clue about Project 4.1 until I was in college. But the subjects were my own grandparents," said Ariana Tibon, the education specialist at the National Nuclear Commission in Majuro, the capital of the Marshalls and its largest city. Like many Marshallese people, Tibon, who is in her mid-20s, has moved back and forth from the islands to the U.S. — briefly attending high school in Arkansas and going to college in Hawai'i before returning home. Her grandparents were among those exposed and evacuated from Rongelap after the Bravo test who became research subjects for U.S. military doctors.

"They trusted the American personnel because they thought they were there to take care of them," said Tibon.

Though the first COFA allowing Marshallese to live and work in the U.S. without a visa was signed in 1986, it was not until 1994 that the United States **declassified** a significant amount of documents related to its Pacific nuclear tests. Among the documents declassified **was one showing** that the U.S. military knew that radioactive fallout was more widespread than it had originally admitted. The U.S. has still not declassified all relevant documents, even as it's negotiating the COFA's third iteration with the Marshallese government.

"How do we negotiate a fair compact if not everything is disclosed?" asked Eldon Alik, the RMI's consul general in Springdale.

Working against ignorance

The slow trickle of information about U.S. nuclear activities in the Marshall Islands has had other effects, too: Most Americans have no idea about the extent of their country's nuclear testing programs, no knowledge of the people it displaced, and no understanding of the ongoing health problems from the radioactive fallout.

"After living here for so long it just baffles me," said Alik. "We're in our second compact and there's still a lot of people that don't know what happened in the Marshall Islands."

Earlier this year, Alik testified in the Arkansas legislature on behalf of a bill that would have allowed Marshallese people to become law enforcement officers in the state. Under the COFA, they're already allowed to serve in the U.S. military. "A lot of these legislators did not know that we have a Compact of Free Association," Alik said. "They don't know the nuclear legacy." The bill ultimately failed.

The near-total ignorance about the history of the Marshallese and their legal status in the U.S. has been a barrier to their receiving what they were promised in the COFA. For example, the initial COFA made Marshallese in the U.S. eligible for Medicaid, the joint federal-state program for the poor. That public health insurance program was needed by many of the Marshallese people who traveled to the U.S. to seek care for thyroid cancer and other conditions caused by radiation poisoning.

But an apparent oversight in the 1996 welfare reform bill championed by President Bill Clinton — a former Arkansas governor — revoked that Medicaid coverage, instead leaving to the states the decision about whether to

"Acknowledge it and put it in the history books so people will learn."

offer it to the Marshallese. Arkansas never did. Despite decades of advocacy, it was not until COVID-19 took a heavy and widely publicized toll on the community that Congress finally corrected its mistake and once again made the Marshallese eligible for Medicaid in all states. The primary push for that legislation **came from** U.S. Sen. Mazie Hirono, a Hawai'i Democrat and the first Asian American woman elected to the Senate.

The lack of American awareness about his people's history also impacts Alik's day-to-day job. "I can honestly say that most of my job is explaining about the nuclear legacy, the Compact of Free Association," he said. "I spend so much time, so many resources doing that on the phone and sending letters." He can rattle off a list of states — Louisiana, Alabama, and Arkansas among them — where Marshallese people have struggled to access services they qualify for because government officials don't know that the compact exists and don't understand what it promises. If the U.S. took a more active role in educating people on the nuclear legacy and the compact, he said, he could spend more time advocating for the Marshallese who have made their home here.

"Acknowledge it and put it in the history books so people will learn," Alik said.

Another issue caused in part by U.S. secrecy around its nuclear history is the lack of knowledge among Marshallese themselves about the nuclear legacy and its consequences.

"These are issues that aren't taught in the classroom," said Maddison, speaking about the nuclear legacy as well as climate change. "A lot of our parents also lack that understanding or knowledge of these two issues that are impacting our community. So much of it on the nuclear side is based on what the United States has told us — so, censorship, being lied to about a lot of things."

Maddison's efforts to educate Marshallese youth in Arkansas about the impact of nuclear testing through the Reverse the Trend group are echoed in Tibon's work on the Marshall Islands. The generation who experienced testing and displacement didn't often volunteer information about their experiences, leading to a knowledge gap on the islands, Tibon observed. "My belief is that it's because of all the trauma," she said. "The generations before us didn't really maybe consider it appropriate for school."

Today she travels to schools around the islands to speak with classes about the nuclear legacy. She also advises the Nuclear Club at the College of the Marshall Islands. When she visited Majuro's high school, the country's largest, she asked students to guess how many bombs the U.S. dropped on Marshallese atolls. No one even came close to 67.

"The highest number I got was seven," she said. "Most of them thought it was just one."

Education and knowledge about this legacy is vital to righting historical wrongs, and to advocating for the Marshallese community still living on the islands and those who have left, community leaders said.

"I always tell [the students], 'I'm telling you all of this because you are the future leaders, and it is important that you keep sharing this knowledge among yourselves,'" said Tibon. "Otherwise, if we just erased this part of history, then the survivors and the victims wouldn't truly get their justice — or any of their descendants, because a lot of them suffer from these illnesses. The less we know about it, the less we'll be able to contribute."

'The loss of loved ones that we buried'

A second event held last month to honor Marshallese victims of U.S. nuclear testing sought to educate and mobilize people in the Marshall Islands and around the world to demand justice for the country and its people. **Titled** "We Are Not Alone," the five-day virtual gathering was **hosted** by the COFA Alliance National Network in Washington state, home to another significant community of Marshallese people, in partnership

with several other nuclear justice organizations. It featured speakers from the Marshall Islands and Marshallese communities in the U.S. alongside representatives of other communities impacted by U.S. nuclear policy during the Cold War era.

"This is the first time I've been to an event that brings so many different groups together," said Trisha Pritkin, a nuclear justice advocate who grew up in a Washington state community contaminated by radioactive fallout from the nearby Hanford Site, a decommissioned U.S. nuclear production complex on the Columbia River that's considered the most contaminated nuclear site in the country. "We are far more powerful and difficult to ignore when we come together."

A flash poll of attendees ranked health care, climate solutions, cleanup and remediation, and compensation as top priorities for justice. Similar priorities were **identified** in 2019 by the Marshallese National Nuclear Commission, established in 2017 by the RMI government. Information and who controls it also featured prominently in the week's discussion. Panelist after panelist called for the U.S. government to declassify all materials related to nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands.

"You should be accountable for your actions," **said** Lucille Brokken, a descendant of Enewetak survivor Bubu Erine Jitiam. "Americans should give more detail about what happened to the islands and the people."

Participants also said the Marshallese people should oversee research into the ongoing effects of nuclear testing on their homeland, and the work should be done by scientists independent of the U.S. government. They also emphasized that the Marshallese need the resources to be in charge of their own future: to conduct research, to train doctors, to build a cancer facility in Majuro capable of treating radiation-related conditions. Though cancer is **the second-leading cause of death**, there are no cancer care facilities or permanent oncologists on the islands — one reason why so many people with radiation-caused diseases have left.

"We don't all want to migrate to the States just to get medical treatment," said Alson Kelen, a former mayor of Bikini Atoll and a **master canoe builder** who sits on the National Nuclear Commission.

In addition, participants called for full funding of the Nuclear Claims Tribunal established under the COFA to compensate Marshallese victims of nuclear testing. The original compact set aside \$150 million in funds — but the tribunal has approved more than \$2 billion in claims. No claim has been fully paid out, and **about half of the people** who were approved for personal injury claims have died without receiving compensation.

"The government officials promised my ancestors that forever they'll treat us as our children, and it doesn't matter where we're at in this world, they will protect us for our lifetime. We don't feel like we've been treated as they promised," said Sosylina Jibas-Maddison, who is the Kili Bikini Ejit officer

"If we could take care of what's going on in the Marshall Islands, I feel like people will stay there and actually create a better life there, rather than come here and be corporate slaves."

in Northwest Arkansas, essentially functioning as a mini-consulate for the approximately 300 Bikinians living in the area, many of whom are struggling with radiation-related health problems. "They're experiencing cancer as a common disease nowadays. It's becoming like the flu."

Jibas-Maddison would like to see the U.S. treat Marshallese as full citizens, making them eligible for things like food assistance and federal student loans. She says this is particularly urgent for the estimated 1,000 people in the U.S. who are descended from the **more than 150 Bikinians** the U.S. military removed from their home atoll, which it made uninhabitable.

"For 75 years now we are homeless," Jibas-Maddison told Facing South. "We don't have a permanent home since Bikini Atoll is highly contaminated still and not safe for us to go back."

Some of the Marshallese people who now live in the U.S., like Maddison of MEI, are disillusioned with life in the states and hope to return to the islands. The pandemic put into stark relief the systemic health and economic problems that face the Marshallese in Arkansas, he said. He sees the economic development and climate change mitigation in his home country as opportunities for self-determination that could also help stanch out-migration. "If we could take care of what's going on in the Marshall Islands, I feel like people will stay there and actually create a better life there, rather than come here and be corporate slaves" working in meat-processing facilities, he said.

But others — especially those whose home atolls have been destroyed — have built a life in the U.S. and do not plan to leave, Jibas-Maddison said. Climate change and rising sea levels further complicate the Marshallese people's hopes to return. "The islands are sinking, that's one of the things we talk about here," she said. "People are getting scared of going back home."

Once on the front lines of U.S. nuclear policy, the Marshall Islands are now on the front lines of climate change — and the two issues have become inseparable for the Marshallese. Rising seas threaten to inundate the Runit dome on Enewetak atoll, where the U.S. has stored deadly radioactive waste from its nuclear testing program. The dome is **already leaching** radioactive pollution into the sea; if submerged, the waste would likely spread through Enewetak's lagoons and potentially the wider Pacific. Marshallese leaders hold the U.S. responsible for acting on that, too.

"It's like history is being repeated," said Maddison. "But with climate change, it's going to be much more destructive because we're talking about the loss of our ancestral lands, the loss of culture. The loss of loved ones that we buried."

This story has been updated to correct that the Castle Bravo bomb was not dropped, but rather detonated in the atoll.

Tags

MARSHALL ISLANDS MARSHALLESE NUCLEAR INDUSTRY NUCLEAR TESTING NUCLEAR JUSTICE



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