

Commemorating International Day Against Nuclear Tests

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The Pacific Islands Forum secretariat, the Marshall Islands Embassy in Fiji and Pacific civil society organizations marked the International Day Against Nuclear Tests with a solemn commemoration this week.

This event provided an opportunity for member nations to reiterate their unwavering commitment to nuclear disarmament and the elimination of nuclear testing.

Given the Pacific region's history as a testing ground for nuclear weapons and the enduring environmental and health consequences, this observance carried profound significance. It underscores the Pacific Islands Forum's dedication to a world free from nuclear threats and its continuous advocacy for peace, stability, and the well-being of its people and the global community.

During his opening address, the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Henry Puna, expressed his appreciation for the collaboration between the Republic of the Marshall Islands' government, facilitated by the High Commission in Fiji, in co-hosting and jointly organizing the event.

"Let me express my profound gratitude to our guest speakers who will share their stories of resilience through the theme "Honoring the past, Empowering the future"

Sharing the same sentiments, Ambassador of the Republic of the Marshall Islands to Fiji, H.E Junior Aini conveyed his appreciation in being able to share the stories of the nuclear affected people of the Marshall Islands.

"The Pacific was once used as a nuclear testing ground with over 315 nuclear weapons being tested. In the case of RMI, 67 nuclear and thermonuclear weapons were detonated in the northern atolls of *Enewetak* and *Bikini*"

H.E Junior Aini continued to share the painful experiences the people of the Marshall Islands continue to struggle with till date.

"Our people have lived through the horrors of these nuclear testing activities. To date we continue to grapple with the generational effects of radiation, sicknesses, displacement, relocation and environmental damages"

Reflecting these sentiments, Marshall Islands student association (MISA) representative Kristy Kabua presented the petition originally delivered to the UN by Dwight Heine in 1954 on behalf of the Marshallese people.

" This petition is important because it highlights the resilience and strength of the Marshallese people. It tells the story of injustice, injustice is still taking place in my home and needs immediate action"

Unfortunately, despite the earnest plea put forth in the petition, the United Nations granted consent for the United States to conduct an additional 55 tests spanning another four years."

From Fiji, Mr. Nacanieli Seru, representing the Fiji Nuclear Veterans Association, recounted the traumatic memories of his exposure to nuclear tests conducted on Christmas Island.

"We were informed that we were embarking on a mission to Christmas Island, with the purpose of witnessing the detonation of a hydrogen bomb," Mr. Seru began, reflecting on the lack of full understanding of the grave risks involved. He went on to describe the severe conditions they endured, highlighting that they were not provided with any protective gear beyond their standard blue uniforms and white overalls.

"We were gathered and instructed to sit along the shoreline, facing the sea, before the bomb's detonation. Later, we were told to turn away from the sea, shielding our eyes as the bomb exploded," he recalled. It was only afterward that they were informed of the potential repercussions that the aftermath of the detonation could have on them and their families.

The event featured a diverse array of artistic expressions, including artworks, a soul-stirring song titled "Aim-Enana (We are not alone)" by Timothy Kabua, and a poignant poem titled "All the Way from Down Here" contributed by Luisa Tuilau, a member of Younsolwara. In a reflection on empowering the future, Tamatoa Tepuhiarii from Maohi Nui (French Polynesia) presented a piece entitled "We are here because They were here." Concluding the arts, Bedi Racule delivered a deeply moving moment with the unveiling of her new poem, "See You Soon, Lagoon."

Pacific Network on Globalisation Nuclear Justice campaigner, Epeli Lesuma said that the gathering to mark the International Day Against Nuclear Tests at PIFS was a reminder that not too long ago the Pacific was still an active nuclear test site.

"It's crazy to think that only in the 1990s, when I was a child, the French were still testing in Maohi Nui (French Occupied Polynesia) and so the pain of nuclear testing is one that is felt across the generations and even by young people like me" Lesuma stated.

Sharing his hopes for the Pacific, Lesuma said despite all the horrors and trauma inflicted by Britain, France and the USA the Pacific people still have hope and faith.

"It was Mr. Nacanieli Seru, the elderly Fiji Navy Christmas Island nuclear test veteran who brought home this message for me. It is this hope and faith which I am sure will continue to inject Pacific people with the energy to keep on keeping on in their efforts to get justice".

Lesuma expressed that in light of Japan's release of their nuclear waste water into the Pacific Ocean, there is a need to hold on tight to this sense of hope and faith and use it to fuel advocacy and lobbying efforts at all levels until Japan stops.

"Their nuclear waste water dumping is expected to take place over 30 years. Only hope and faith can continue to sustain all of us in this fight. It's 2023, using the Pacific as a dumpsite for nuclear waste in whatever form it takes should never be tolerated. Enough is enough"

Delivering his closing remarks, H.E Jim Armistead, High Commissioner of the Cook Islands to Fiji urged the Pacific people to move forward together united in our commitment to a safer nuclear free world.