



**Submission of  
Republic of the Marshall Islands  
to the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of IDPS**

25 August 2020

**Displacement legacy**

It is important to consider the history of forced displacement in what is now known as the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). From colonial occupation, to war and nuclear testing, the Marshallese people continue to live with the intergenerational impacts of displacement. Climate change now adds an additional dimension to internal displacement.

Between 1946 and 1958, 67 nuclear and thermo-nuclear detonations were conducted in our country, the equivalent of 1.6 Hiroshima bombings every day over a period of 12 years. These tests displaced families from the Islands of Enjebi, Enewetak, Rongelap, Rongerik, and Bikini. During the time of German occupation, the people of Ujelang were displaced and their homelands later used as the site of forced exile for the Enjebi and Enewetak people. More recently, the people of the mid-corridor islands of Kwajalein are indefinitely displaced due to military operations. All of these homelands are indefinitely contaminated by radioactivity and military waste.

**Displacements in the context of climate change**

Military waste from ongoing operations, scuttled ships from the nuclear testing era, and unexploded ordnance and unsettled claims from World War II have undeniably shrunk settlement solutions for the population. Today, over half of the population lives on Majuro Atoll, which now has a higher population density than Bahrain or Bangladesh.

The Marshall Islands comprise 29 low-lying coral atolls and 5 single islands, for a total of 1,152 islands. Out of this, only 24 atolls are inhabited. The RMI's average coastal elevation is about 2 feet above sea level. Rising sea levels are eroding the coasts and causing saltwater intrusion into our already limited freshwater reserves. In 2013 and 2016, RMI declared a state of disaster because of droughts.

In March 2014, inundation occurred as a result of extremely high tides and a southern swell. Over one thousand residents of Majuro atoll were forced from their homes, and residents on outer islands including Mili and Arno suffered considerable property and crop damage. Due to change in climate patterns, typhoons are becoming more frequent. They are a huge

threat to our homes, infrastructure and economy; in 2015, Typhoon Nangka cost the country more than 3% of its GDP in a single night. Outer islands are particularly vulnerable. Their remoteness from the capital doesn't allow for quick transportation, which is an obstacle to food and water supply in times of drought, or to intervention during natural disasters.

According to IOM policy brief Issue.1/vol.5 of July 2019, "Marshallese perspectives on migration in the context of climate change", a third of our population has now emigrated abroad and although they may not cite climate change as driving factor, the survey recognises their concern with regards to the livability of the Islands. As reported by the Internal Displacement Monitoring centre, RMI has over 1,800 new disaster displacements from 2008 to 2018, and 200 in 2019. This is in addition to well over 1,000 people displaced by the nuclear tests, who have not been able to return. In all, at least 3,000 persons remain forcibly displaced in the Marshall Islands, representing over 5 percent of the population.

King tides and over-wash has already eroded Marshallese standard of living, deteriorating housing conditions below adequate standards, and effectively raising the vulnerability of entire communities to levels of hardship akin to those that were displaced by the nuclear tests.

### **Policy responses**

The government does not have specific legislation on displacement, and monitoring remains a gap. Marshallese authorities' response is based on the Joint National Action Plan for Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Management Plan of 2014 and the Compact of Free Association with the United States which includes a Disaster Assistance Emergency Fund (DAEF) and an agreement to allow assistance, services and programs. The RMI has bolstered its national capacity to address climate change impacts through the creation of the Climate Change Directorate (CCD) and by strengthening other relevant agencies and improving national coordination between planning and implementing partners. The current National Adaptation Plan (NAP) is being drafted through a series of public consultations, the plan will map out the specific vulnerabilities in the population and the atolls with a view to ensure their viability. Given that the main trigger of displacement is sea-level rise and the Marshall Islands is responsible for less than 0.0001% of global GHG, our focus has been on raising the ambition of mitigation at the international stage calling for no increase above 1.5 degrees Celsius in order to live.

For Atoll Nations loss of land and the internal displacement that results from it raises existential threats at the individual, clan and national levels. Land in the Marshall Islands is held in perpetuity by members of clans and extended families, and certain lands and fishing waters are held by the entire community. Practices vary from atoll to atoll, but land tenure entitlements are passed on matrilineally with the exception of Enewetak, Enjebi, and Ujelang. Twelve paramount chiefs on the Council of Iroij are advisors to the Cabinet and review land tenure issues and other matters of traditional concern.

### **Concluding observations**

With over 5 percent of our population internally displaced, the issue remains underreported. Gaps remain in terms of monitoring, normative framework development and most critically despite the Marshallese call for international recognition of our “internal relocations” and threat of sea-level rise, humanitarian assistance and support remain inexistent. By comparison one of the most prominent IDP situations worldwide, Iraq’s IDP represents 4 percent of its population (IDMC 2020).

We are calling for a greater recognition to the specific vulnerabilities of atoll nations and in line with the latest scientific evidence of the IPCC and WMO, a recognition that slow-onset disasters do produce very real humanitarian emergencies. The Marshall Islands government recognises its duty to prevent any forcible displacement of its population, having framed existing plans such as the NAP under the “right to remain”. We also recognise our responsibility to assist and uphold the rights of those displaced, those hosting and all those threatened by sea-level rise; however, we are “unable” to address the root cause and its impact alone, therefore we:

1. We request international assistance in helping us with our right to remain and combat the threat of displacement;
2. We request, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) assistance’s in developing the frameworks and tools that could consolidate our existing plans and policies addressing internal displacement;
3. We extend an invitation to the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of IDPs to conduct an official visit to the republic of the Marshall Islands, to assess the IDPs situation and come up with recommendations to strengthen the national response but also the international response;
4. We call on the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, to recognise that climate change is now producing emergencies;
5. We call on donor countries and humanitarian agencies to develop programmes to provide assistance to displacement resulting from sea-level rise and the climate emergency.