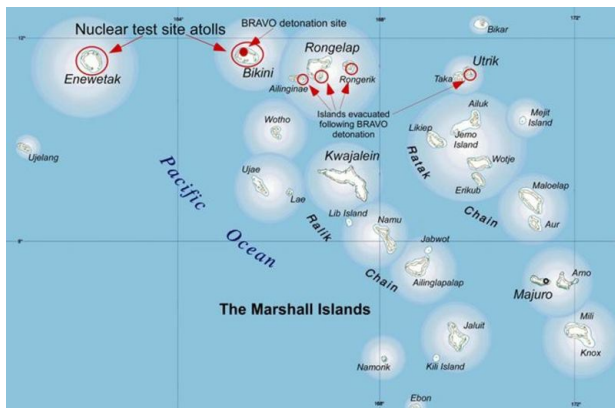




United Nations Report Reveals the Ongoing Legacy of Nuclear Colonialism in the Marshall Islands

Robert Jacobs & Mick Broderick

In September of 2012, Dr. Calin Georgescu, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and waste, submitted his report on the legacy of the nuclear weapon testing program of the United States in the Marshall Islands to the Human Rights Council of the UN.¹ This long overdue report offers a harsh assessment of the history of American nuclear testing in the Pacific and the subsequent underplaying of both the health and welfare of the Marshallese, and the radiological contamination wrought by the 67 nuclear weapon tests (atmospheric and underwater) conducted there between 1946 and 1958.



A map showing the nuclear history of the Marshall Islands
(Source)

This report offers an important step forward in addressing the devastation to both community and environment that six decades of neglect have left in their wake. Our own, ongoing research on the social and cultural consequences of nuclear weapon testing around the world, conducted as part of the Japanese-government funded *Global Hibakusha Project*, largely supports the findings of the UN Rapporteur, while casting them in a global context.



Bikinians in the housing provided for them as refugees (1948)

While the specifics of these events are unique to the

Marshallese, unfortunately this experience has been repeated throughout the Cold War in a range of international territories. And only some of the tests were conducted by the United States. These nuclear test programs have also resulted in ongoing legacies of contamination, denial, neglect and the failure to provide adequate environmental remediation and compensation. Affected populations include, in particular, indigenous peoples from: Kazakhstan (nuclear testing by the Soviet Union), populations downwind from the Nevada Test Site (nuclear testing by the United States), Australia and the former Gilbert Islands (nuclear testing by the United Kingdom), Algeria and French Polynesia (nuclear testing by the French), and minority populations downwind from Lop Nor (nuclear testing by the Chinese). Amongst the other more recent nuclear powers (India, Pakistan, North Korea) it is fair to assume that similar impacts have affected populations from underground testing in remote areas, just as countless communities have been adversely affected by the industrial production of nuclear weapons and their fuel cycle.

The UN report details recommendations for the parties involved: the government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands; the government of the United States of America; and the United Nations and international community as a whole. We welcome this honest assessment of the conditions and imperatives necessary to address this neglect.

The report states, unambiguously, that the United States government should fully fund compensation to individual Marshallese by the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, and release all secret reports concerning the extent of the contamination, the health data collected by the U.S. government, the full history of the tests, and issue a public apology from the President of the United States.² These Special Rapporteur recommendations to the United Nations formally recognize the culpability and impact of U.S. policy in relation to the Marshall Islands across generations.

While the majority of the report's recommendations are laudable, some are problematic. For example, Recommendation 63(a) is to carry out an independent comprehensive radiological survey similar to IAEA studies on other test sites in other countries. To propose that the study be conducted by a sibling UN agency chiefly composed of the very nations that conducted and preserve this nuclear colonialism, is unacceptable and doomed to be contentious.

What is required is a truly independent radiological survey conducted by competent and independent authorities not unduly influenced by the historical perpetrators of the activities they are investigating.

Additionally, Recommendation 63(f), to develop an economic diversification strategy to reduce overreliance on the Compact of Free Association with the government of the United States, is an admirable recommendation, however this overreliance has been based upon the geopolitical minnow of the RMI negotiating bilaterally with superpowers (e.g. U.S.A., China) at great disadvantage to maximize economic and territorial advantage. Past examples include the scandalously disadvantageous granting of fishing rights (negotiated with Japan, South Korea and Taiwan) and the ongoing social, cultural, educational and economic dependency and imbalance of trade/aid with the U.S.A. The reports offers no clues about how the fundamental problems of dependency can be overcome under the conditions facing these and other small island territories.

Recommendation 63(i) seeks assistance to improve public infrastructure. Apart from highlighting water, sanitation and waste management



A Marshallese citizen is tested for the presence of internalized radionuclides



A Rongelapese child being examined by an AEC doctor after his exposure to radioactive fallout from the Bravo test (1954)

facilities, the report fails to foreground and recommend adopting a strategy for sustainable energy production and use from abundant, local renewable sources such as solar, wind, wave and potentially geothermal rather than the ongoing reliance upon imported fossil fuels. Given the current threat to the R.M.I. by climate change related sea level rises and extreme weather events, a continued, overreliance on imported fossil fuels seem doubly problematic.

Recommendation 64(f) is directed towards relevant "State actors of the United States of America" to guarantee the right to effective remedy for the Marshallese people, including by providing full funding for the National Claims Tribunal to award adequate compensation for past and future claims. This is an important and strong recommendation, however, there needs to be recognition that the existing mechanism for compensation is far too

reliant on both the vagaries of international capital and the U.S. stock market. This long-term investment strategy offers little protection in times of economic uncertainty (e.g. post Global Financial Crisis), while essentially providing American tax payer funded subsidies to Wall Street without an enduring commitment to benefiting the Marshallese.



Artwork hanging in Bikini City Hall on Majuro Atoll

Finally, and surprisingly, the report barely mentions the American strategic military base that dominates the atoll of Kwajalein (the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site). By ignoring this facility, the report leaves open the strategic and environmental impact of the operation of this military base on the Marshallese.³ The psychological impact of an ongoing missile test site in a nation still traumatized by decades of contamination, secrecy, exclusion and neglect by nuclear weapons testing must not be ignored. A further implication not considered by the report is the Republic of the Marshall Islands joining with other regional nations in signing the Treaty of Rarotonga that formalizes a nuclear weapon free zone in the Pacific.⁴



Residents of Bikini Atoll being forcefully evacuated so that it can be used for nuclear weapon testing (1946)

Nearly seven decades on from the advent of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands it is high time that the international community recognize the tragedy that befell the people of the Marshall Islands under the UN sanctioned protection of the United States. And from this realization, the international community must also come to terms with the impact on other former colonial territories and conduct a similar Special Rapporteur investigation at each site.

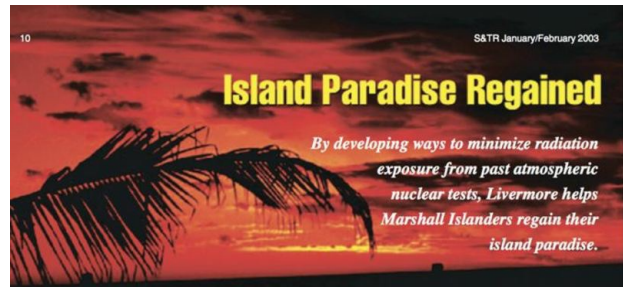
Mick Broderick is Associate Professor and Research Coordinator in the School of Media, Communication & Culture at Murdoch University, where he is Deputy Director of the National Academy of Screen & Sound (NASS). Broderick's scholarly writing has been translated into French, Italian and Japanese, and his major publications include editions of the reference work *Nuclear Movies* (1988, 1991) and, as editor, *Hibakusha Cinema: Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Nuclear Image in Japanese Film* (1996, 1999). Recent co-edited collections include *Interrogating Trauma: Arts & Media Responses to Collective Suffering* (2011) and *Trauma, Media, Art: New Perspectives* (2010).

Robert Jacobs is an associate professor at the Hiroshima Peace Institute at Hiroshima City University. He is the author of *The Dragon's Tail: Americans Face the Atomic Age* (2010), the editor of *Filling the Hole in the Nuclear Future: Art and Popular Culture Respond to the Bomb* (2010), and co-editor of *Images of Rupture in Civilization Between East and West: The Iconography of Auschwitz and Hiroshima in Eastern European Arts and Media* (2012-forthcoming). His book, *The Dragon's Tail*, was recently released in a Japanese language edition by Gaifu. He is the principal investigator of the *Global Hibakusha Project*.

In a separate United Nations report considering the Bikini Atoll World Heritage nomination the evaluation committee reported that Bikini and other testing grounds around the world were subjected to "a type of nuclear colonialism which is specific to nuclear weapons."⁵ While there has been some comparative epidemiological work in the past on nuclear test site populations, this "colonial" nuclear mindset is essential to understanding the social, cultural and economic impact upon these communities across generations. This is the primary focus of our ongoing work in the *Global Hibakusha Project*.

The original document may be found [here](#).

Recommended citation: Calin Georgescu with an introduction by Mick Broderick and Robert Jacobs, "United Nations Report Reveals the Ongoing Legacy of Nuclear Colonialism in the Marshall Islands," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol 10 Issue 47, No. 1, November 19, 2012.



An example of the whitewashing of the contamination of the Marshalls in the US nuclear weapons community (a Lawrence Livermore National Lab publication, see pp. 10-14): [\(Source\)](#)

Articles on related subjects

- Robert Jacobs, [Radiation as Cultural Talisman: Nuclear Weapons Testing and American Popular Culture in the Early Cold War](#)
- Mick Broderick and Robert Jacobs, [Nuke York, New York: Nuclear Holocaust in the American Imagination from Hiroshima to 9/11](#)
- Oishi Matashichi and Richard Falk, [The Day the Sun Rose in the West. Bikini, the Lucky Dragon and I](#)

Notes

¹ ["Mission to the Marshall Islands \(27-30 March 2012\) and the United States of America \(24-27 April 2012\)"](#)

² The Nuclear Claims Tribunal [website](#).

³ ["Joint Briefing by US Air Force Global Strike Command, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and US Army Space and Missile Defense Command."](#)

⁴ ["Treaty or Rarotonga."](#)

⁵ [UNESCO Advisory Body Evaluations: Bikini Atoll \(Marshall Islands\) No 1339.](#)