From the Marshall Islands to Fukushima:
Nuclear Displacement as a Persistent Human Rights Challenge

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I would like to extend a warm welcome to all of you and thank you for taking the time to be here during a very busy Human Rights Council session. I regret that I cannot join you in person today, but would like to express my strong support nonetheless for this important event and the work you are all doing.

The history of nuclear displacement in the Marshall Islands is one of resilience in the face of profound injustice. While administering the territories as a United Nations Trusteeship, the United States conducted at least 67 nuclear tests in the country, leading to the forced displacement Indigenous communities from their ancestral homelands under coercive conditions and with false promises that displacement would only be temporary and in apparent violation of obligations under the terms of the Trusteeship to safeguard the health and freedom of movement of the population.

The Bikini, Enjebi, Enewetak, Rongelap, and Utirik peoples were relocated multiple times, often to areas lacking basic sustenance, medical support, and safety from nuclear fallout. The peoples of Kwajalein atoll were similarly forced from home to construct the military installations necessary for the nuclear testing programme, which were repurposed following the programme's termination but remain requisitioned for the exclusive military use of the United States, leaving their Indigenous inhabitants in displacement.

This displacement was neither voluntary nor informed, nor necessary from a military perspective or for the safety of the population concerned, attesting to its arbitrary nature under international law. The principle of free, prior, and informed consent, foundational to the rights of Indigenous Peoples, was repeatedly violated. Marshallese communities were misled about the safety of contaminated lands and exposed not only to radiation but also, in many cases, to unethical medical experimentation under programs such as Project 4.1.

The consequences of this displacement reverberate to this day. Internally displaced Marshallese suffer from a profound loss of cultural identity, which is inextricably intertwined with their land, and intergenerational trauma. Their rights to health, food, water, and housing have been persistently undermined, as displaced Marshallese are no longer able to rely on food from their contaminated ancestral lagoons and lands, and are crowded into increasingly dense urban areas. Many still reside on islands prone to the effects of disasters and climate change like Kili and Mejatto, or on marginal land in urban areas, putting them at risk of future displacement.

Despite efforts through the Compact of Free Association and the establishment of the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, reparations have been inadequate. The Tribunal awarded over $2.3 billion in claims but paid out only a fraction before it ran out of funding. Meanwhile, displaced populations continue to face an uncertain future. They remain without full access to safe food, uncontaminated water, or adequate health services, and continue to rely on aid from the United States, whom we have seen unilaterally terminate almost all foreign assistance programmes overnight.

What we see in the Marshall Islands is not simply a historic injustice but an ongoing human rights crisis. The right to self-determination has been systemically eroded, with displaced communities excluded from key decisions about their lands and futures. The enduring presence of military installations on occupied lands, without the meaningful inclusion or consent of landowners, raises serious legal and ethical concerns.

In my report, I call on the Government of the Marshall Islands to strengthen legal protections for internally displaced persons, reform land governance, and improve oversight of displacement-related funds. I commend the Government for its commitment to transitional and climate justice and urge continued efforts toward community-led relocation planning where necessary.

I also call on the United States to accept its historical and ongoing responsibilities. This includes issuing a formal apology, providing adequate and timely reparations, and ensuring full declassification and transparency around nuclear testing data. Military leases must be renegotiated in full consultation with landowners, respecting their right to self-determination and remedy.

The nuclear legacy of the Marshall Islands has permanently altered the ability of those affected to enjoy the full spectrum of their human rights. The ongoing displacement of its people is one of the most visible scars of this legacy. As new conflicts and displacement unfold before our eyes over the question of nuclear armament, the falsehood once told to the Marshallese — that their suffering and displacement to enable nuclear tests was 'for the good of all mankind' — stands exposed in its full, painful clarity. We must not allow the Marshallese people to be treated as expendable test subjects. Justice delayed is justice denied and the time for remedy, accountability, and action is now.

Thank you so much for your attention and I wish you a fruitful continuation.