

**Statement of
The Honorable Jack Ading
Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Marshall Islands
to the Committee on Natural Resources of the United States House of Representatives
Hearing on the Importance of the U.S.' Pacific territories and the freely associates states
in countering China's malign influence and maintaining U.S. strategic interests
in Guam August 24, 2023**

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members,

Thank you for inviting President Kabua to testify or send a designee to the Committee's hearing in Guam on the importance of U.S. territories and the Freely Associated States to the United States' ability to counter China's malign influence and maintain U.S. strategic interests. It is extremely time-consuming to travel from the Marshall Islands to Guam and back, primarily because of limited flights, but this hearing is of the highest importance to the Marshall Islands. So, I have the honor of representing the President, who looks forward to meeting with you in a few days.

We can only speak regarding the role of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), of course, and the issues in our islands that undermine U.S. interests and create vulnerabilities to China.

The role starts with the RMI having a relationship with the U.S. that is much closer than any that which the U.S. has with nations with which it is not freely associated.

A Compact of Free Association, subsidiary agreements, and U.S. laws that amended and added to the Compact define the relationship. More fundamentally, however, the relationship is based on shared values and the great extent to which these were developed during four decades of U.S. administration of our islands.

Under the relationship, the RMI –

- Allows the U.S. to deny access of forces of other nations to an area west of Hawaii that is as large as Alaska, California, and Florida combined;
- Refrains from interactions with other nations that the U.S. says would compromise security; and
- Hosts what the U.S. military Joint Chiefs of Staff have categorized as the world's premiere range for testing Inter-continental Ballistic Missiles and supporting the military's new space operations at Kwajalein Atoll. This is where the U.S. military perfected its missile strikes to be so precise that shots can hit a single house from thousands of miles away and where the U.S. military continues to develop its ICMB shot capabilities.

Additionally, the RMI generally votes with the U.S. in the United Nations.

Also – and perhaps most importantly – enlistment rates in the U.S. military from the RMI are higher than from any State, although the U.S. has not yet provided for standard care of veterans if they come back to the RMI. Many, therefore, do not, depriving the RMI of talent it needs.

Further, the RMI is a staunch and enduring ally of Taiwan, which is important to countering China's malign influence and maintaining U.S. strategic interests in the region.

The RMI highly values its relationship with the U.S. and wants to strengthen it so that it can continue.

During U.S. territorial administration of the Marshall Islands, two of the most important roles that our islands had and continue to have in preserving U.S. strategic interests worldwide and countering Chinese influence in the Pacific were initiated by the U.S.

The first was most of the atmospheric testing of nuclear bombs that the U.S. has conducted. The U.S. perfected its nuclear weapons capability in our islands.

In the process and after, however, even more of all of the radioactive waste that U.S. produced in atmospheric nuclear bomb tests than the waste from tests in the Marshall Islands was left in the RMI – making populated and what had been populated atolls even more unsafe, because the U.S. shipped in radioactive waste from weapons testing in Nevada when it administered our islands.

Fallout from the testing; the radioactive waste; inadequate and irresponsible efforts to bury the waste and not sufficiently cleaning up waste – which generated terrible health problems for people and made populated and what had been populated atolls unsafe; a lack of health care; and the U.S. not fulfilling its obligations in connection with the testing created the paramount issue that the Marshall Islands has with the U.S. and could undermine the relationship. I will explain this major and multi-faceted issue further later in my statement.

The second role that the RMI serves in maintaining U.S. strategic interests around the world and countering malign Chinese influence in the region is the major U.S. military facility that the RMI hosts on Kwajalein, which you are scheduled to visit when you reach the RMI. The ICBM testing has also created problems in the RMI, but we continue to host the base in keeping with the RMI's commitments to the U.S.

Regarding Chinese efforts to get the RMI to shift its alliances, one example relates to the second largest portion of our private sector and a major contribution to the RMI's economy and budgets. This is the RMI being one of the three largest ship registries in the world. China charges vessels flying our flag significantly more to dock at its ports than it charges the other two.

Another effort has tried to financially shift the positions of RMI leaders on the RMI's alliances.

The RMI, however, is now concluding negotiations with the U.S. on financial and Federal programs assistance needed to enable the relationship to continue and counter Chinese efforts that could undermine it.

This assistance is vital to the RMI. It is urgently needed as of October 1st since most crucial assistance is due to expire September 30th.

It is provided for in legislation that the U.S. Executive branch has submitted for congressional approval and emphasized the need for in anticipation of underlying agreements. The representatives of the presidents of the RMI and the U.S. are working to conclude these agreements before Congress goes back into session.

The precursors to the negotiations included meetings with our president requested by President Trump in the Oval Office and with Secretary of State Pompeo. The importance of the talks has also been highlighted by statements and actions of President Biden.

The U.S. initiated the negotiations just over three years ago, but the talks really started to become productive at the end of 2021 with the engagement of senior U.S. National Security Council staff and the March 2022 appointment of a presidential envoy on top of much lower-level departmental officials.

When the U.S. initiated the negotiations, it asked the RMI to identify its priorities. From the first, President Kabua and the people of the RMI emphasized justice related to unresolved issues from the U.S. nuclear weapons legacy as being of the highest priority.

Another was challenges related to rising seas, which threaten the existence of a nation with no elevation higher than two meters. As U.S. strategic control over the area of the RMI is based on our land borders, this is also a national security threat for the U.S.

Other priorities included the living conditions of the people who work at the Kwajalein base but live elsewhere on the atoll and impacts on nearby islands as well as financial and Federal program needs.

The biggest issue dividing our nations, which has the potential for being exploited by China and undermining U.S. strategic interests in the RMI, consists of serious, unresolved problems lingering from the U.S. nuclear weapons legacy.

I know that the purpose of this hearing is to discuss China's malign influence in the region and in our islands and preserving U.S. strategic interests, but the Committee should understand the context of these issues and how not adequately addressing RMI issues lends itself to increasing that malign influence and undermining U.S. interests.

Americans are an exceedingly decent and generous people. I am certain that most would be shocked and embarrassed if they were to learn about the history and legacy of the nuclear testing program while we were governed by the U.S.

In appointing the U.S. as trustee for the Marshall Islands, the U.N gave the U.S. the responsibility to protect us and promote our well-being.

When plans for nuclear bomb testing at Enewetak Atoll began to be implemented, the U.N. Security Council expressed concern. It was told by President Truman that, "The Enewetakese will be accorded all rights which are the normal constitutional rights of the citizens under the Constitution but will be dealt with as wards of the United States for whom this country has special responsibilities."

This was a promise that was never kept, as the people of Enewetak languished in impoverished exile for 33 years in the previously uninhabited atoll of Ujelang, the most remote atoll in the Marshall Islands. It was inconsistent with America's role as trustee to desecrate our homeland by massive nuclear explosions for 12 years, exposing us to deadly, horrific health and environmental hazards that we were never warned about—and that continue to affect us to this day.

The nuclear detonations in the Marshall Islands had an explosive yield equivalent to roughly 1.7 Hiroshima-sized bombs per day over the entire 12 years of testing. In terms of radioactive iodine alone, 6.3 billion curies of iodine-131 were released during the U.S. nuclear testing program—42 times greater than in all of the atmospheric testing in Nevada, 150 times greater than released by the Chernobyl breach, and 8,500 times greater than released from Atomic Energy Commission operations at Hanford, Washington.

Preparing for a 1954 test at Bikini Atoll—one that would result in the largest U.S. nuclear

detonation ever—U.S. military officials learned that a change in wind patterns threatened to bring fallout to inhabited Rongelap and Utrik atolls, including others that had not been evacuated. They went ahead with the test anyway without warning the islanders, who were blanketed in radioactive fallout and had no idea what it was or that it was dangerous.

Almost 70 percent of the children on Rongelap Atoll who were under 10 years old at the time of the blast eventually developed thyroid tumors. And many women from several atolls, Rongelap and Utrik for example, later gave birth to babies who resembled jellyfish and peeled grapes, incidents similar to mothers in Utah who were downwind from the Nevada test site. Some died at birth or after a few hours of life. Many other women had miscarriages.

The people of Rongelap, Utrik and others from the Marshall Islands, did indeed become human guinea pigs under a secret radiation study of their bodies, code named “Project 4.1.” And these studies were done without their consent or knowledge.

The people of Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap and Utrik were forced to leave their islands. And were exiled from their atolls and eventually returned home based on U.S. assurances that it was safe—only to find out years later that radiation levels were too high, and no local food could be consumed. Some of the islands of both Bikini and Enewetak were completely vaporized. Many others remain unsafe for human habitation today—and will be for as long as anyone can imagine. Today, people of Bikini and Rongelap cannot return to their atolls due to high radiation contamination of their land, food, and environment.

The damage to our environment and our health caused by the U.S. nuclear testing program are not just a part of our history: They continue to plague us even today.

For example, the people of Enewetak have lived in the shadow of a massive nuclear waste dump for over four decades. That waste dump, known as Runit Dome, contains 110,000 cubic yards of radioactive waste gathered from around the atoll decades after the nuclear weapons tests. The waste includes tons of plutonium-239 with a radioactive half-life of 24,100 years.

The U.S. Department of Energy admits that radioactive material is leaking from Runit Dome into Enewetak’s lagoon, but we were told not to worry because the radioactive material already in the lagoon dwarfs the amount of radioactive material buried under Runit Dome. We need the U.S. to tell us: What are the health risks of living on the shores of a lagoon with a larger amount of radioactive material than the infamous Runit Dome nuclear waste dump?

The settlement for the Marshallese, many of whom are still exiled from their home islands nearly three-quarters of a century after the nuclear testing program began, is a tiny fraction of the billions of dollars that have been paid to compensate Americans living downwind—some several hundred miles downwind—of the Nevada Test Site under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA). This disparity shows that the U.S. has fallen far short of the ideal of equality in our case.

The U.S. Senate has passed legislation that would expand RECA eligibility for compensation from the Marshall Islands nuclear tests but only to residents of Guam. We applaud this action and the realization that U.S. atmospheric nuclear testing in the

Marshall Islands had consequences beyond the Four Atolls that the U.S. has recognized. The imitation to the four atolls in the RMI is belied by overwhelming scientific, radiological and health evidence and consequences to the contrary.

All of this provides opportunity for the PRC to create mischief in our relationship and numerous attempts to undermine the very close relationship that my country enjoys with Taiwan. This isn't necessary, and while we will work to complete our negotiations with the U.S. to extend the Compact, we must remember that the nuclear issue must be addressed to restore the confidence of the Marshallese people in the United States.