

## THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

»... no nation, and no people, should ever again be faced with a burden such as ours. And there is really only one way to assure that – through full global acceptance and ratification of this Treaty.«

# It is time for the CTBT to come into force

INTERVIEW WITH  
PRESIDENT JURELANG ZEDKAIA  
OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

*The Marshall Islands have witnessed firsthand the immediate and long-term effects of nuclear weapon testing on human health, the ecosystem and the environment. Speaking at the Conference on Facilitating the Entry into Force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) in September 2009, John Silk, the Foreign Minister of the Marshall Islands, poignantly described the effects of the U.S. testing programme: "The use and testing of nuclear weapons has created a burden, a legacy of impacts which have lasted generations, legacies on our land and our health handed down from mother to daughter, and father to son." Could you elaborate on this statement?*

Although the nuclear tests ended in 1958, their lasting consequences continue to be one of our most important struggles. Firstly, the health impacts on our population continue to be passed down through generations, and are very much a contemporary issue. Secondly, while some remediation has occurred, some of our local communities continue to remain in exile as we seek to ensure full scientific understanding. For the Marshallese, our land is closely tied to our very identity and culture. Thirdly, we have yet to receive adequate and full compensation for our losses. Fourthly, we are faced with addressing the storage facility on Runit island (see cover) for some of the radioactive

material. This storage facility is on a low-lying island, surrounded by oceans and vulnerable to climate change impacts. The scientific understanding of human and environmental exposure to nuclear material has been, unfortunately, a moving target; some of our communities resettled in their traditional homeland decades after testing ended, and had to be evacuated again when the science was revised. There is still, to this day, some dispute over the safe levels of exposure, and so the risks posed by testing may remain. In September, Minister Silk acknowledged the important actions already taken by the United States to address these impacts, and discussions are underway with the U.S. Congress





Majuro and Arno Atolls,  
Marshall Islands

on some of these remaining issues. But ultimately, the deep scars on our nation caused by nuclear testing can never be erased, no matter how many years pass.

*How do you think the damage caused by the nuclear testing programme in the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958 has helped raise awareness about the perils of these weapons of mass destruction?*

We cannot undo the past, but the world must never again repeat such mistakes. It is important to note that these nuclear tests were also conducted by the United States with the explicit authorization of the United Nations (in Trusteeship resolution 1082 in 1954, and resolution 1493, adopted in 1956). During the time of testing, there was considerable attention both from the international community, and scientists and public citizens within the United States.

We have continued over the years to remind the international community of the lessons which should have been learned then, and which must be learned now. We were one of the key nations speaking before the International Court of Justice, during its consideration of the use of nuclear weapons in 1995.

**»The CTBT defines a truly comprehensive and globally structured platform for preventing nuclear testing. It builds a global consensus and strong momentum for both immediate efforts to reduce arsenals and the long-term goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world.«**

*The CTBT not only prevents the development of new nuclear weapons and the improvement of existing nuclear weapon designs but also helps prevent human suffering and environmental damage caused by nuclear testing.*

*Although the Treaty is approaching universal adherence, with 182 signatures and 151 ratifications to date, three of the Pacific Island States – Niue, Tonga and Tuvalu – have still not signed the CTBT. How do you think these non-signatory States can be persuaded to sign the Treaty?*

Of course, we cannot speak for our Pacific neighbours on specific policy issues. From our own experience as a small and recently independent nation, we are often overwhelmed by the number of international treaties and their ratification or implementation obligations. We have one of the highest "treaty per capita" ratios in the world. While the CTBT is a clear global priority, many other treaties also have very important goals, and it can be difficult to know which to address first, since we cannot do all at once when resources are limited.

## »I deeply regret that such a Treaty, and such a global consensus, did not exist when testing occurred in the Marshall Islands.«

*Based on the experience of the Marshall Islands, how do you think the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) can help those countries that have decided to sign or ratify the Treaty in terms of legal or administrative assistance?*

A range of actions or options could be possible. From the Marshall Islands' unique perspective, sometimes more general strategies have to be further refined or closely tailored to address national circumstances. In addition, the CTBTO can continue to assist in technical areas where national expertise has not been fully developed – in our experience, the most effective assistance strategies covering capacity building are those which are sustained over a longer period of time.

*The Republic of the Marshall Islands was amongst the first 71 countries to sign the CTBT when it opened for signature on 24 September 1996. It ratified the Treaty on 28 October 2009. Why did the Marshall Islands decide to ratify the Treaty at this particular point in time?*

Increased international attention to nuclear testing, including the upcoming Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference this May, provides a compelling reason to again focus global attention on a nuclear-weapon-free world. The issue of nuclear testing and weapons was recently listed by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as one of the UN General Assembly's top work goals for this year.

*What impact do you think ratification by the Marshall Islands might have on other countries that have not yet done so?*

The Republic of the Marshall Islands has a strong moral voice on this issue; we are very unique in terms of the impacts on our people and culture. One of the best ways the international community can respond to us is by showing their firm and legal commitment to halt future testing. This is particularly true for nations which possess nuclear stockpiles.

It should be unquestionable that no nation, and no people, should ever again be faced with a burden such as ours. And there is really only one way to assure that – through full global acceptance and ratification of this Treaty.

*In addition to the political benefits, membership of the CTBTO offers a number of potential civil and scientific applications of its monitoring data, which could contribute to sustainable development and human welfare. These include tsunami warning, research on ocean processes and marine life; climate change research; volcanic eruption monitoring for aviation safety; and studies on the Earth's structure. How important are some of these potential uses of CTBT data for the Marshall Islands?*

Given the impacts suffered by our nation, we have a rightful and highly symbolic role to play as a global beacon by gathering monitoring data. We should be among the first to warn the world. The more comprehensive benefits from environmental monitoring are, for us, equally important. Being a small island nation, we also have one of the most expansive, pristine and diverse ocean territories in the world, and our survival, and our food security, depend closely on the health of our coastal resources – which are increasingly threatened by climate change impacts.

We hope to work closely with the CTBTO to bolster our monitoring capacity, and to become an important international voice on understanding our environment.

*How significant do you consider the CTBT to be for international efforts to reduce nuclear arsenals, and for the long-term goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world?*

The CTBT defines a truly comprehensive and globally structured platform for preventing nuclear testing. It builds a global consensus and strong momentum for both immediate efforts to reduce arsenals and the long-term goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world. The Treaty platform means that the global community sees not only political commitment, but also multilateral assurance, to prevent the harmful use of such weapons.

I deeply regret that such a Treaty, and such a global consensus, did not exist when testing occurred in the Marshall Islands.

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

#### **PRESIDENT IROIJ JURELANG ZEDKAIA**

was elected as the fifth President of Republic of the Marshall Islands in October 2009. Mr Zedkaia first became engaged in local politics in 1991 as a representative of the people of Majuro Atoll, which is the location of the capital of the Marshall Islands. He was elected Vice Speaker of Parliament in 1997. Between 2000 and 2007 he served again as a Member of Parliament for Majuro Atoll and in 2008 became the Speaker of Parliament.