

Nuclear legacy in the Marshall Islands: “Nomads in their own country” – UN Expert

MAJURO (30 March 2012) – United Nations Special Rapporteur Calin Georgescu warned Friday that the communities affected by nuclear testing over sixty years ago in the Marshall Islands are “yet to find durable solutions to the dislocation to their indigenous ways of life.” Mr. Georgescu also urged the country’s government, as well as the United States of America and the international community, to find effective redress to the affected population.

“They feel like ‘nomads’ in their own country, and many have suffered long-term health effects,” said the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights obligations related to environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and waste, at the end of the first mission ever to the Republic of the Marshall Islands by an independent expert of the UN Human Rights Council.

“I have listened to the concerns and stories of affected communities from Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap and Utrik. As a result of the nuclear testing, all of these communities have suffered dislocation, in one form or another, from their indigenous way of life,” he noted. “Many have become internally displaced persons who are yet to find durable solutions.”

Mr. Georgescu focused his fact-finding mission on the human rights issues associated with the sixty-seven nuclear tests conducted by the United States in the islands from 1946 to 1958. During most of that time, the Marshall Islands was a part of the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands administered by the United States.

“Human rights are not meant to be a set of legal principles and rules on paper alone. They are a necessary requirement in an evolving reality. We must all continuously strive to meet this requirement to live with dignity and respect for ourselves and our future generations,” the rights expert stressed.

“The affected communities are searching for solutions, but are yet to feel that they have been restored to a position that is any way equivalent to the life they and their families lived before this dislocation,” said the Special Rapporteur. “Each of the communities from these four affected atolls has a unique history in relation to the nuclear testing and each needs its own solutions.”

The independent expert drew special attention to the need for strategic and long-term vision to tackle the residual consequences of the nuclear testing programme; to ensure sustainable progress beyond 2023, when U.S. assistance under the Compact of Free Association is due to end; and to cope with the growing challenges of climate change in the specific circumstances of the Marshall Islands.

“These are issues of utmost importance, in particular, when we consider the sensitive and fragile environmental conditions prevailing in the Republic of the Marshall

Islands, an atoll nation," he said. "It is therefore important to create an appropriate framework to ensure conditions for an efficient and ecological stewardship in RMI. UNESCO has declared Bikini Atoll a World Heritage site, and the other atolls of RMI could equally share such a status, based on their great natural capital, as well as their extraordinary and resilient people."

"The long term survival of the Republic of the Marshall Islands depends on investment in education," the UN Special Rapporteur underscored. "This means education should be considered a top priority in order to conserve and use sustainably the cultural heritage of the country."

During his four-day mission, Mr. Georgescu met with President Christopher J. Loeak, as well as government representatives, ministers, senators, high-level officials, experts, academics, civil society, local communities and members of the press.

The UN Special Rapporteur's final conclusions and recommendations will be submitted as a report to the Human Rights Council in September 2012. "I shall expect that the follow-up to my report will result in meaningful action," he said.

ENDS

Calin Georgescu, the Executive Director of the National Centre for Sustainable Development in Bucharest (Romania), was appointed Special Rapporteur in 2011 by the Human Rights Council. As Special Rapporteur, he is independent from any government or organization and serves in his individual capacity. Learn more on the mandate of the Special Rapporteur: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/environment/waste/index.htm>

*UN Human Rights – Asia-Pacific Region:
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AsiaRegion/Pages/AsiaRegionIndex.aspx>*

*For inquiries and **media requests**, please contact:*

In Majuro: Mr. Terry Keju, Majuro UNFPA Joint Presence (Phone: +692 625-6486/ email: keju@unfpa.org)

In Geneva: (+ 41 22 917 9333 / srtoxicwaste@ohchr.org)

For **media inquiries** related to other UN independent experts:

Xabier Celaya, UN Human Rights – Media Unit (+ 41 22 917 9383 / xcelaya@ohchr.org)

UN Human Rights, follow us on social media:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/unitednationshumanrights>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/UNrightswire>

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/UNOHCHR>

Check the Universal Human Rights Index: <http://uhri.ohchr.org/en>



UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

Statement of the Special Rapporteur on toxic waste on finalisation of his visit to the Republic of the Marshall Islands

MAJURO (30 March 2012) At the end of his official country mission to the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI), the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights obligations related to environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and waste, Mr. Calin Georgescu, delivered the following statement:

“From 27 to 30 March, I have had more than twenty substantive meetings with dignitaries of state, ministers, senators, high-level officials, experts, academics, civil society, local communities and members of the press. I was personally honoured to be received by His Excellency Christopher J. Loeak, President of the Republic of Marshall Islands.

I was impressed by the dedication of the RMI authorities at all levels and their willingness to seek imaginative and realistic solutions to the complex problems facing this noble island nation now and in the years to come. I also welcome the openness and cooperative spirit shown by the Government of the United States of America in support of this mission.

My mission has focussed on the human rights issues associated with nuclear testing in the RMI. From 1946 to 1958, sixty-seven nuclear tests were conducted by the United States on the Marshall Island’s atolls of Bikini and Enewetak. During most of that time, the Marshall Islands was a part of the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands administered by the United States.

During these few days, I have been able to collect a significant amount of information, including documentation that is highly relevant to the concerns regarding human rights obligations related to environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and waste. I will be studying these materials and other information supplied to me in order to prepare my conclusions and recommendations that will be submitted as a report to the Human Rights Council in September 2012.

Today I will only make a few preliminary remarks regarding my conclusions. I have listened to the concerns and stories of affected communities from Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap and Utrik. As a result of the nuclear testing, all of these communities have suffered dislocation, in one form or another, from their indigenous way of life. Many have become internally displaced persons who are yet to find durable solutions and expressed that they feel like “nomads” in their own country. Many have suffered long-term health effects.

The affected communities are searching for solutions, but are yet to feel that they have been restored to a position that is any way equivalent to the life they and their families lived before this dislocation. Each of the communities from these four affected atolls has a unique history in relation to the nuclear testing and each needs its own solutions. The long term survival of the RMI depends on investment in education. This means education should be considered a top priority in order to conserve and use sustainably the cultural heritage of RMI. The Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Government of the United States of America bear the responsibility to find effective redress for these communities. The international community also has a responsibility to assist in this process.

At this stage, I would like to stress the need for strategic and long-term vision regarding how to tackle the residual consequences of the nuclear testing programme; how to ensure sustainable progress beyond 2023, when U.S. assistance under the Compact of Free Association is due to end; and how to cope with the growing challenges of climate change in the specific circumstances of the RMI. These are issues of utmost importance, in particular, when we consider the sensitive and fragile environmental conditions prevailing in the RMI, an atoll nation.

It is therefore important to create an appropriate framework to ensure conditions for an efficient and ecological stewardship in RMI. UNESCO has declared Bikini Atoll a World Heritage site, and the other atolls of RMI could equally share such a status, based on their great natural capital, as well as their extraordinary and resilient people.

I shall expect that the follow-up to my report will result in meaningful action. Human rights are not meant to be a set of legal principles and rules on paper alone. They are a necessary requirement in an evolving reality. We must all continuously strive to meet this requirement to live with dignity and respect for ourselves and our future generations.