

Session 1, International Meeting
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Iokwe aolep. Greetings to you all.

Immensely grateful to Yayoi for the opportunity to speak at today's event.

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On March 7, 1946 – at the age of 2 – my paternal grandmother, Almina Lokiar Maddison, along with 166 other inhabitants of Bikini Atoll in the northern Marshall Islands, departed their homeland with all their belongings. US Navy Commodore Ben Wyatt told my people they were doing so for the “good of all mankind.” The exchange between Wyatt and the Bikinians was filmed and shown worldwide and portrayed as the US asking permission from the Bikini people. The American administration did not want to be accused of forcefully removing people from their ancestral land.

However, the decision had already been made in Washington weeks before, and with powerful warships anchored in the lagoon, my ancestors knew that “no” was not an acceptable answer. Many Bikinians trusted the United States and believed they would return home. That day on Bikini would be my grandmother's last in her ancestral homelands.

Between 1946 and 1958, the United States detonated 67 large-scale atomic and hydrogen weapons in the Marshall Islands, equivalent to 7,200 Hiroshima bombs. The combined destructive force of radiation contamination unleashed by these nuclear weapons vaporized several islands, forced communities to relocate, and rendered numerous islands and atolls unsuitable for human habitation. It also produced a litany of radiation-related illnesses: thyroid, stomach, liver cancer, and leukemia. Women had miscarriages or gave birth to severely deformed babies with translucent skin. Some women birthed what was described as clumps of grapes, or what they called jellyfish babies. Some babies had elongated heads.

Birth defects and cancers are still common in our community. And now, for people whose ancestors frequently lived into their 90s and 100s are dying in their 20s, 30s, and 40s due to illnesses like diabetes brought on by a drastically changed diet—a consequence of forced removal and changes in our traditional lifestyle.

The Marshallese story is much more than one of exploitation and victimization, though. The Marshallese story is also one of activism. We are activists and promoters of a nuclear-free world.

Marshallese have been addressing and raising awareness about the devastating consequences of nuclear testing in our islands since the testing period.

On March 1, 1954, the United States detonated its largest nuclear weapon, Castle Bravo, which rained down fallout on inhabited atolls. On 20 April, Marshallese leaders submitted a petition to the United Nations requesting a halt to nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands because of the increasing number of Marshallese who were removed from their lands and the growing number of those who suffered from radiation sickness. However, the United Nations allowed testing to proceed. A second petition from the Marshallese people in 1956 called for the discontinuation of the U.S. Nuclear Testing Program because of its impact on Marshallese bodies, environment, and culture. At that time, Marshallese were not passive victims but sought

the role of active agents of change, one that the youth of the Marshall Islands have taken up.

Since the late 1950s, the international community and the United Nations have played an important role in nuclear nonproliferation. The United States stopped testing in the Marshall Islands in 1958 due partly to public awareness of the dangers of nuclear weapons testing. Despite test bans and treaties, we all continue to live with risk, not only through the threat of nuclear weapons use but due to the continued development of nuclear weapons, which disproportionately impacts communities of color.

My grandmother is still with us. But she will never be able to return to Bikini Atoll and be buried next to her ancestors. However, I hope she and all our Marshallese elders will see nuclear justice achieved in their lifetime.

But the Marshall Islands are faced with another threat: climate change. The country is at an average elevation of two meters above sea level and at risk of disappearing under the waves within this century. In the 1970s', the United States sent 8,000 U.S. servicemen and non-servicemen to construct a dome on Ānewetok Atoll, one of the two places in the country used for nuclear weapons testing, to store nuclear waste from the 67 tests. Environmental experts have warned the government and people of the Marshall Islands that if the country were underwater today, the structure would break open, releasing 3.1 million cubic feet of nuclear debris, including lethal amounts of plutonium, which would have further devastating consequences on the environment and people's health.

With all that in mind, let's continue to move forward in this crucial work by engaging and learning from each other through our work, stories, and efforts for nuclear justice, a nuclear-free world, and a livable planet for all.