On 6 August 2023, I attended the peace memorial ceremony to commemorate the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945. Collectively, we remembered how Hiroshima was destroyed, and we grieved this horrific event. During this memorial, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida stated that Japan is the only country that has experienced the effects of atomic bombing during a war. The nuance in this statement is important: other countries have also suffered from the impact of nuclear weapons; however, these cases are not directly linked to war and have often gained less attention.

An example of such a case is the Marshall Islands, an island nation in the Pacific Ocean located between the Philippines and Hawaii. Between 1946 and 1958, the United States, which colonized the country after World War II, used the islands for numerous nuclear weapon tests (Ewing et al., 2023). Parsons & Zaballa (2017) called this a ‘Cold War Tragedy’: sixty-seven (67) nuclear tests were conducted (Matsumoto, 2020). Among these was the first-ever hydrogen bomb, a bomb that was 1000 times more powerful than the bomb used in Hiroshima (Dickerman & Sumulong, 2021).

The effects of the nuclear tests were enormous: two of the 26 atolls were destroyed completely, and many other islands were contaminated with nuclear fallout (Matsumoto, 2020). The radiation of the nuclear bombs caused exposure for thousands of Marshallese, causing a significant increase in several forms of cancer and metabolic disorders (Ewing et al., 2023). Signs of increased congenital disabilities were also found (Nembhard et al., 2019).

The nuclear testing has caused ‘imperial ruination’: the nation was ruptured and fragmented, and people were displaced and moved to neighboring islands or the United States, where most Marshallese migrants live. Many Marshallese initially thought that this ‘Marshallese diaspora’ (Dickerman & Sumulong, 2021) would only be temporary (Keown, 2019), without knowing that their lives would be changed forever. In 2011, 22,343 Marshallese were living in the United States. This number was estimated to reach 30,000 in 2020, about half of the Marshallese population (Jetñil-Kijiner & Heine, 2020). The devastation of the marine ecosystem and ensuing relocations affected the matrilineal basis of the Marshallese traditional culture and indigenous identity (Schwartz, 2022).
Consequently, the Marshallese identity and spirit are shaped by the country’s nuclear history. According to Jetñil-Kijiner & Heine (2020), no Marshallese citizen, regardless of the current residency, is untouched by these historical events. The destruction of the physical and spiritual well-being of the people and the existence of personal and collective grief contribute to the tragedy of the islands (Matsumoto, 2020). However, while grieving and fighting for their nation, climate change is now endangering the future of the Marshall Islands.

Since the islands are only two meters above sea level, environmental threats, such as king tides and saltwater intrusion into freshwater wells, are already challenging the Marshallese (Jetñil-Kijiner & Heine, 2020). Furthermore, the rising sea and the contaminated seawater around the islands are a poisonous combination, which could spread nuclear environmental damage across the islands (Keown, 2019). Other existing problems due to climate change are issues with food production in the country and increased health risks due to an increasing number of mosquito-borne illnesses (Jetñil-Kijiner & Heine, 2020).

The islanders are advocating for justice: the colonization and imperialism of the United States permanently destroyed their home, and they are still waiting for the promised compensation (Keown, 2019). The financial compensation could be used not just for decontaminating the islands but also for healthcare, which is currently lacking. For example, amid the cancer risks from the nuclear fallout, there is no single cancer care facility in the country (Dreher, 2021).

Although the Marshallese have suffered considerably, they are fighters. Their spirit is remarkable, and their motto, ‘Ukōt bōkā eo,’ which means ‘turning the tides’ (Dreher, 2021), is an inspiring call for change. The story of the Marshallese encourages us to keep advocating for peace while considering environmental and climate change issues. We should stand with the most vulnerable victims of historical injustice because it is never too late to turn the tide.

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About the Author

Amra (25) is a Dutch master's student in the Joint International Master in Sustainable Development, a combined program of Graz University (Austria), Leipzig University (Germany), and Hiroshima University. She has dedicated her master's studies to learning about climate change and researching pathways for sustainable development. Her focus was initially mainly on environmental sustainability and resource economics, but in Hiroshima, she has added the perspective of peace studies, global justice, and equality. After finishing her master's program, she would like to continue fighting for a fairer and greener world on both personal and professional levels. [LinkedIn]

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References

Dickerman, K. & Sumulong, L. (2021, January 22). Forced out of their homes by years of U.S. nuclear testing, the Marshallese diaspora has spread to Springdale, Ark. The Washington Post.


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