

Ursula Gelis

'Responsibility to Protect' – US Nuclear Terror on Pacific Islanders

“The spheres of action created through the finiteness of the Earth - for the first time in violent contrast to the infiniteness of our development - makes the species automatically turn to collective suicide.”¹

Baudrillard

Ursula Gelis, Executive Director of the 'Global Women's Association against Nuclear Testing' works for the rights and needs of victims of nuclear weapons explosions and nuclear testing. Her partners are around the world, often in rural areas, and are profoundly affected by the long-term effects of nuclear weapons testing. At the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons in December 2014², she talked to politicians from the Marshall Island: Mrs. Abacca Anjain-Maddison, community chief at the ministry of Internal affairs and to the Foreign Minister (Tony de Brum) and Sue Haseldine, anti-nuclear activist and nuclear test victim from Australia.³



From left to right: Abacca Anjain-Maddison, Ursula Gelis and Sue Haseldine. Photo: Rick Wayman

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) claimed that ‘if we want to live, it is forbidden, to reach the frontiers of our [scientific] abilities.’⁴ Are we on our way to collective suicide, as he thought?

¹ Jean Baudrillard. Die Illusion des Endes oder Der Streik der Ereignisse. Berlin 1994, p. 130 (english:UG).

² http://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Abruestung/HINW14/HINW14_Austrian_Pledge.pdf.

³ **Interview with Sue Haseldine**, available at: <http://www.wagingpeace.org/the-caretaker-and-the-plague/>.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard. Die Illusion des Endes oder Der Streik der Ereignisse. Berlin 1994, p. 158 (english:UG).

In December 2014, the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons⁵ clearly stated that “the rights and needs of victims of nuclear weapons explosions and nuclear testing [...] have not yet been adequately addressed” (Austrian Pledge)⁶.

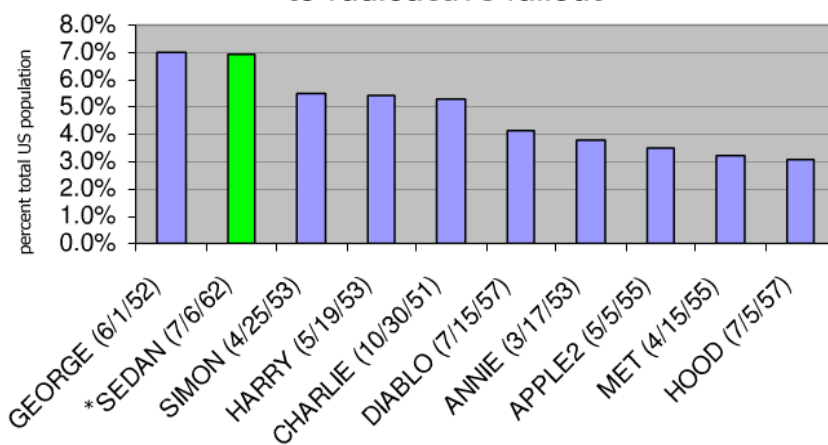
The nuclear age catapulted us into a world with unpredictable consequences: for us, all living creatures and the environment. The United States nuclear weapon testing program inflicted enormous suffering on innocent people by ignoring the terrible consequences of the use of weapons of mass destruction:

“The United States conducted 1,032 nuclear tests between 1945 and 1992: at the Nevada Test Site, at sites in the Pacific Ocean, in Amchitka Island of the Alaska Peninsula, Colorado, Mississippi, and New Mexico.”⁷

The US nuclear bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 -instantly killed tens of thousands of people and the suffering of the survivors and their children still goes on.⁸

How the devaluation of humans goes hand in hand with technological military achievements is well documented. Look, for instance, at the exposure of US citizens to nuclear fall-out.⁹

Nuclear tests that exposed the most US residents to radioactive fallout



*The value for Sedan is much more uncertain than for the other tests

⁵ <http://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/european-foreign-policy/disarmament/weapons-of-mass-destruction/nuclear-weapons-and-nuclear-terrorism/vienna-conference-on-the-humanitarian-impact-of-nuclear-weapons/>.

⁶ http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/vienna-2014/Austrian_Pledge.pdf

⁷ <http://www.ctbto.org/nuclear-testing/the-effects-of-nuclear-testing/the-united-states-nuclear-testing-programme/>.

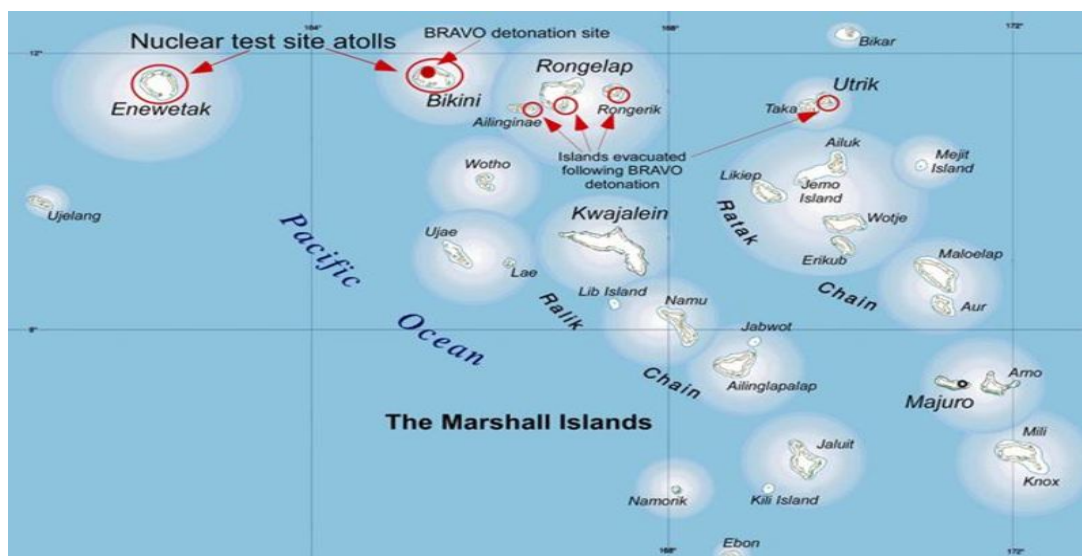
⁸ Read my interviews with Nagasaki survivors: <http://www.wloe.org/Ursula-Gelis.655.0.html>.

The health problems of the exposed ‘down winders’ are serious and nuclear fall-out contaminated the environment for years to come for any productive purpose.¹⁰

Paradise Lost

If a government puts its own population at risk, how about mistreating non-nationals and people labeled ‘savages’? Was it resentment that a state proud of its scientific and military accomplishments embarked on the destruction of a Pacific paradise in Micronesia called the Marshall Islands?¹¹ Or could those isolated atolls guarantee military enterprises best kept unknown to the world?

European mind-set and patriarchy was imported to the Marshall Islands by Spanish explorers at the time of the inquisition (1494) and, in 1885, the region became a German protectorate. In 1914 Japan seized the atolls and, after World War Two, the “Marshall Islands were made part of the United Nations [strategic] Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands under U.S. jurisdiction in 1947”.



<https://www.google.com/search?tbm=isch&tbs=rimg%3ACbIOVXBK5LvDIjR7DGNg>.

⁹ <http://www.ctbto.org/nuclear-testing/the-effects-of-nuclear-testing/the-united-states-nuclear-testing-programme/>.

¹⁰ http://historytogo.utah.gov/utah_chapters/utah_today/nucleartestingandthedownwinders.html.

¹¹ Named after British Naval Captain William Marshall.

One of the US obligations was to “protect inhabitants against the loss of their lands and resources.”¹² The International Trusteeship objective meant “to promote the political, economic and social advancement of the Territories and their development towards self-government and self-determination. It also encouraged respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and recognition of the interdependence of peoples of the world”.¹³

The US managed to pervert their obligation - the ‘responsibility to protect’ - towards the Marshall islanders by converting the territory into a testing ground for national interests, by conducting 67 nuclear weapons explosions.¹⁴

Am I my brother’s keeper?

In Vienna, the foreign minister of the Marshall Islands, Tony de Brum, spoke about the atmosphere of the US military presence as disrupting the Islanders’ identity, causing ruling agony and dislocating communities. The people from Rongelap, for instance, cannot return even today, due to contamination caused by nuclear fall-out. The Northern Marshallese islands were subjected to routine bombings: 67 tests, i.e. “1.7 Hiroshima shots every day for 12 years” (de Brum).



Tony de Brum. Vienna, 5th of Dec. 2015. Photo: UG

The local people had not given permission to test nuclear devices on their soil. The mendacious argument of the trustees simply was that it is God’s will and good for mankind to test - no explanation about the consequences ever reached an islander’s ear (de Brum).

¹² <http://www.rmiembassyus.org/Nuclear%20Issues.htm#Chronology>.

¹³ <http://www.un.org/en/decolonization/its.shtml>.

¹⁴ Between 1946 and 1958, the U.S. carried out 67 nuclear weapons tests at Bikini and Enewetak atolls in the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean. The atolls were some of the main sites included in the “Pacific Proving Grounds”. <http://www.ctbto.org/nuclear-testing/the-effects-of-nuclear-testing/the-united-states-nuclear-testing-programme/>.



Castle BRAVO, 3.5 seconds after detonation, photo taken from a distance of 75 nautical miles from ground zero, from an altitude of 12,500 feet. From DTRIAC SR-12-001. <http://blog.nuclearsecrecy.com/2013/06/21/castle-bravo-revisited/>

Tony de Brum recalls the hydrogen bomb test from March 1954, called ‘Bravo’, “the largest U.S. nuclear test ever exploded”.¹⁵

*No one was living on the Bikini atoll at the time of the BRAVO blast. However, a total of 236 people were living on the atolls of Rongelap and Utirik, 100 and 300 miles east of Bikini, respectively. The residents of Rongelap were exposed to as much as 200 rems of radiation. **They were evacuated 24 hours after the detonation. The residents of Utirik, which were exposed to lower levels of radiation, were not evacuated until at least two days later [bolded by author].** After their evacuation, many experienced typical symptoms of radiation poisoning: burning of the mouth and eyes, nausea, diarrhea, loss of hair, and skin burns. Ten years after the blast, the first thyroid tumors began to appear.*¹⁶

On March 1st, 1954, Tony held a basket for his grand-father, who was fishing at the time. He distinctly remembers a specific moment: Out of the blue he saw a giant flash, followed by the whole sky turning red. That traumatic event had nothing to do with his home, the parallel chains of coral atolls, the Ratak, the Sunrise, to the east and the Ralik, the Sunset to the west.¹⁷ This ‘new sun’ turned everything upside down. He witnessed the heinous arms race for the biggest and most deadly bomb. Again, the trustees failed to protect their fellow human beings.

“Until the ‘Bravo’ explosion nobody actually could imagine the harm inflicted on the islanders”, says Tony de Brum. “Until today, babies with serious deformations (“jellyfish-babies”) are born”.

Sometimes they are born alive and live for a few minutes or hours, and you can see the blood moving through their bodies before they die. We give birth to babies with missing limbs, or their organs and spinal cords on the outside of their bodies. We never experienced these types of births before the U.S. testing program. We have complained about these births for decades

¹⁵ <http://www.atomicarchive.com/History/coldwar/page06.shtml>.

¹⁶ <http://www.atomicarchive.com/History/coldwar/page06.shtml>.

¹⁷ The New Encyclopædia Britannica. Chicago 1988, vol. 7, p. 881.

*and we are always told by the U.S. Government that they are not the result of radiation exposure.*¹⁸

After the traumatic Bravo-test, the Marshallese filed new petitions at the UN about the actions of the US government. Previous attempts never made it to the Security Council. The nuclear legacy remains with the people until today. They face denial of their ongoing health problems, get no access to restricted information and have to tackle the psychological burden of being displaced from their original birth places. In Marshallese culture, land and ocean have a soul and a value.

The Marshallese, the tiny courageous nation of 70.000 people, attained independence in 1986 under a Compact of Free Association with the United States.¹⁹ The peace-loving islanders stood up to “end this [nuclear] madness” (de Brum) because they do care about mankind and do not want that other people should suffer what they have to endure.²⁰ They have the mandate. “Look at us, how much nuclear testing damaged our communities, what will nuclear war then do for all of us?” (de Brum).

On April 24, 2014, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) filed lawsuits against all nine Nuclear Weapon States in the International Court of Justice and, separately, against the United States in U.S. Federal District Court.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty has been in force for over 44 years. The Nuclear Weapon States continue to rely heavily on nuclear weapons and are engaging in modernization programs to keep their nuclear weapons active for decades to come.

The time has come for the Nuclear Weapon States to be held accountable for their inaction.²¹

This law suit is not about financial compensation but refers to Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (entered into force 1970): “Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue

¹⁸ <http://nuclear-news.net/2013/03/04/analysis-roof-collapse-at-chernobyl-what-does-it-mean-for-russias-aged-chernobyl-type-reactors/>. And: <http://psci3206colorado.blogspot.no/2010/04/jellyfish-babies-birth-defects-of.html>.

¹⁹ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rm.html>: “The Marshall Islands hosts the US Army Kwajalein Atoll (USAKA) Reagan Missile Test Site, a key installation in the US missile defense network.”

²⁰ [2012]: And, for the first time in the history of the United Nations, Marshallese citizens stood before a United Nations Council in defense of the human rights of their communities, with survivor testimony on United States nuclear weapons fallout, environment, health and human rights consequences, and the ramifications of continuing failure to achieve environmentally sound management and disposal of the hazardous substances and toxic wastes resulting from US military activities in the Pacific Proving Grounds.
<http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/09/17/nuclear-betrayal-in-the-marshall-islands/>.

²¹ <http://www.wagingpeace.org/nuclearzero/>. <http://www.nuclearzero.org/>

negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”²²

Like Bertha von Suttner, the first female Nobel Peace Prize laureate from 1905, said ‘the justice of the future has to be prepared²³,’ so do the people of the Marshall Islands convincingly pursue *in good faith* the path towards to a world free of nuclear weapons.

The administrated human

Another dark chapter of the US-Marshallese relations is ‘Project 4.1’, the "Study of Response of Human Beings Exposed to Significant Beta and Gamma Radiation due to Fallout from High Yield Weapons.”²⁴ Roughly a week after the ‘Bravo’ detonation, a secret medical group examined the exposed islanders. The monitored people of Rongelap and Utrik were told that the exposure to radiation happened “accidentally” (de Brum).

Three years later, Rongelap was declared safe for rehabilitation and people returned being institutionally surveyed: [...] A report from 1957 declared: "even though the radioactive contamination of Rongelap Island is considered perfectly safe for human habitation, the levels of activity are higher than those found in other inhabited locations. [...] **The habitation of these people on the island will afford most valuable ecological radiation data on human beings [bolded by author].**"²⁵

“On arrival, before debarking, the people gathered under the deck awning and offered prayers and hymns of thanksgiving to God for their safe return to their native land. [...] Unfortunately, the stay of the Rongelap people on their home island was not to be permanent.

In 1985, the local Rongelap authorities, doubting the U.S. claim that Rongelap was radiologically safe, arranged to have the people moved to an island in Kwajalein Atoll. As of now, the people have not yet returned.”²⁶

²² <http://www.armscontrol.org/documents/npt>.

²³ Brigitte Hamann. Bertha von Suttner. 3rd ed., München 2006, p. 181.

²⁴ <http://www.rmiembassyus.org/Nuclear%20Issues.htm>.

²⁵ <http://www.rmiembassyus.org/Nuclear%20Issues.htm>.

²⁶ Robert A. Conard. Fallout. Ney York 1992, Chapter III, p. 12.

<http://www.osti.gov/scitech/servlets/purl/10117645>.

Women's power to take action

Abacca Anjain-Maddison works as a governmental official in the community development department at the ministry of internal affairs. Her focus is on human rights, gender issues, child rights, and children with disabilities.

At the Vienna conference, the presentation of Mary Olson, Senior Radioactive Waste Policy Specialist with Nuclear Information and Resource Service (NIRS)²⁷ pointed out that life-time cancer fatalities among those exposed to ionizing radiation as adults show a ration of 2 men to 3 women, children: 2 boys, 4 girls.

For Abacca, this confirms her experiences from the Marshall Islands; meanwhile, the US is saying that the high cancer rate is not radiogenic related. She emphasizes that she is “happy with Olson’s report because it opens a big cloud of hope and it reassures me that we are not making things up!” By withholding relevant information, the US government puts the burden of proof on the islanders and is exercising new suppression mechanisms.

Abacca grew up in a civic-minded family; generation after generation has served as leaders of communities. So far, becoming an activist, was “only a small transition”. She thinks that the remote Marshall Islands were chosen for the nuclear test program because activities could be kept in great secrecy. “I would have been not surprised if racist elements were involved as well. We were considered as black, ‘we are savages’, stupid!”

“I was not around then but I learned that during the testing years our people were traumatized by leaving their homelands. Being exiled meant almost to commit suicide – the people did not know what would be at the other end of the dark tunnel.” Family splits happened frequently, because “the lineage became disrupted”. Giving birth to the second and third generation after being expelled from homelands caused serious psychological problems. By being dislocated, the “sense of belonging is not there and the feeling of being Marshallese at all” has vanished. “It makes you feel worthless if you cannot exercise your cultural roots. I am afraid that we are talking about lost generations.

Our traditional customs provide knowledge to have a good life. Not a rich one necessarily but your being is natured and comforted – all this is broken up. Our grandparents are teachers, families have shared responsibilities and everybody is brother and sister. You are born into a community and everybody responses to common needs. The bombs changed all of that.”

²⁷ Mary Olson. Nuclear: War of Human Consequences.

http://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Abbruestung/HINW14/Presentations/HINW14_S1_Presentation_Mary_Olson.pd.

US military presence today

The United States maintains a military facility on the Marshall Islands, “the US Army Kwajalein Atoll (USAKA) Reagan Missile Test Site, a key installation in the US missile defense network.”²⁸ “With more than 40 years of successful support, [the base] provides a vital role in the research, development, [and] test [...] of America’s missile defense and space programs.”²⁹

Abacca talked about the restricted areas of the US base which leaves crowded conditions to the islanders forcing them to live on a 3.5 miles island. Now 15,000 people exist in a place once called “the slum of the Pacific”, near the military installations. There is a little improvement though. “People came from all over the Marshall islands to look for jobs at the base. Despite the fact that these people were employees, the Americans did not care to improve their living conditions.”

Apparently the previous attitude of relating to the islanders had not changed much. For instance, “the Marshallese are not allowed to use the US military hospital on the base, even if it is a question of life and death.”

The Marshallese have a long unresolved issue with the US not taking responsibilities for islanders suffering from the long-term effects of nuclear testing and contamination. Abacca stresses that her government has “no capacity to deal with the radiogenic illnesses.” If a child has leukemia for instance, it will be separated from the family and send to Honolulu, Taiwan or the Philippines.” Also the financial burden is enormous, beside the psychological problems. So far “we do not get international support to tackle these problems”, Abacca says.

Abacca is positive that the law suit against the nine nuclear weapons states to disarm will forge new alliances for the struggle for a nuclear weapons free world by engaging in purposeful networking and awareness-raising for women from all over the world. “We have to meet at international fora, working inclusively by exchanging our experiences and share information with new groups.”

The gender impact of the bomb

“Our women are strong leaders and are willing to speak about radiation related issues. Actually, in Marshallese culture, women traditionally did not speak about their bodies but the bomb has changed that. A woman accumulates radiation in her body and gives birth to a child. So there is a transfer from generation to generation. My society follows a matriarchic pattern. You own land through your mother. Our women talk about breast cancer. Now, the taboo is broken and women are free to address the long-term effects of nuclear testing.”

²⁸ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rm.html>,

²⁹ <http://www.smdc.army.mil/RTS.html>.

Not enough medical screening is done and “women get their cancer diagnosis right on the spot”. Yet such procedures are usually not being done. For a long time, prenatal diagnostics have been in place. Abortions are illegal. “We have no capabilities to predict if the child in the womb has disabilities or not. We have ultra sound. Abortions are not really an issue on the islands, only in rape cases. For us, a child is a blessing. If a young women cannot care sufficiently for her child, there are programs for international adoption.”

Beside environmental problems, a military base causes societal damage, for instance through prostitution. “The US base is under American jurisdiction and a problematic encounter with an islander cannot easily being legally solved. The United States practice a strategy to divide the population by putting them into different categories: the islanders recognized as being affected by testing and the others”, Abacca says.

Abacca points out that not all Marshallese women know about previous nuclear testing. Some left the region and came back. It has been only recently that the nuclear legacy has found its way into the text books.

Call for international assistance

”I was visiting Fukushima in 2012 and found the situation similar to ours,” Abacca recalls, “I was impressed that everybody had a Geiger counter, measuring all the time, and I thought that is something we also should have, especially the people living in the contaminated areas. The Japanese will send some over to us.”

This is particularly important because the US wants to move people back to contaminated islands, claiming that they are safe. “The Americans did clean a tiny space and then declare that the whole atoll is safe.” – A project to create realities, diminishing the radiological consequences of the nuclear program. Returnees will be living “exclusively on imported food supplies - do not touch a coconut! If you touch it, you will get cancer and then it is your own fault! Do not leave the area we cleaned up for you!”

It is critical to create and implement protective measures: for instance, an education program through which everybody could learn about radiation levels in order to increase personal safety. At the moment, islanders use other islands for food supply. “Grandmothers would like to go back, for instance to Rongelap, but they do not want to put their children and grandchildren at risk, when they would follow and end up contaminated.” Generations do not want to be separated.

Unfortunately, the Marshallese people have not had the capacities to involve international experts to make radiological calculations. “We need to ask the international community to help us to invite independent scientists.” With the help of the Japan Council against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs (Gensuikyo) a little bit was done so far – they measured Cesium-levels.



<https://www.google.com/search?q=enewetak+atoll+dome>.

Another issue is the plutonium³⁰ contamination.” There is an instable concrete plutonium storage, the ‘Runit dome’, and it is instable." It is on Enewetak Island, in the ‘ground zero’ area. “If plutonium gets into the environment, air and water, it will contaminate everything. We speak about this urgent problem with the Pacific Islands Forum³¹ leaders. A lot more awareness raising has to be done.”

Abacca expects from conferences like this to learn more about the humanitarian impact of any nuclear weapon use. She hopes that testimonies like hers will “touch the hearts and not only the minds. Only the heart will make a difference!”

She received encouraging feedback in Vienna and is convinced to see positive results in the closer future.

“In a world come into adulthood, exotic mega-projects or wars which endanger the shared biosphere are suicidal [...]. The time of constant growth is over. It is time to bloom. (Rosalie Bertell).³² - “We didn’t do this [to file a law suit] to annoy the United States and we certainly don’t want to jeopardize the relationship or damage the relationship in any way. This is more in the nature of a friend or a younger brother saying, ‘Hey, come on, do what’s right here’.³³

Oslo, January 2015

Sources:

³⁰ Jeremy Bernstein. Plutonium. A History of the world’s most dangerous element. New York 2007.

³¹ <http://www.forumsec.org/>.

³² Rosalie Bertell. No immediate danger. Prognosis for a Radioactive Earth. Chicago, 1985, p. 290.

³³ <http://www.newsweek.com/marshall-islands-nuclear-lawsuit-reopens-old-wounds-262491>.

Video: The Islands of Secret Project 4.1: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/28826>.

Race for the Super Bomb (Film) .Featuring newly discovered archival sources from Russia, civil defense films, and recently declassified military footage, "Race for the Superbomb" tells the story of a world at the brink of destruction. This program is based in part on Richard Rhodes book, Dark Sun. <http://www.worldcat.org/title/race-for-the-superbomb/oclc/61773240?referer=di&ht=edition>.

Tony de Brum, Foreign minister explains the law suit against the 9 nuclear weapon states (April 24, 2014): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAIvrI05rPI>.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VI7TWwfatCY>.

Sean McBride Prize to the Marshallese: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRnkILSZNeA>.

Useful readings:

<http://www.icanw.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/ICAN-PacificReport-FINAL-email.pdf>.

Human Rights Council, on the radiological status of the Marshall Islands (2012):

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-48-Add1_en.pdf.

<http://www.newsweek.com/marshall-islands-nuclear-lawsuit-reopens-old-wounds-262491>

<http://www.wagingpeace.org/kathy-jetnil-kijiner/>.

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<http://www.rmiembassyus.org/Nuclear%20Issues.htm#Chronology>.

Ursula Gelis: <http://www.theoslotimes.com/i-was-stigmatized-as-a-walking-atomic-bomb/>.