

Nuclear Disarmament: If Not Now, When?

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Oh plaintive cry for justice, for change, for the world we must create, welling up from a tiny island nation in the Pacific Ocean. I can only pray: Let there be an authority large enough to hear it.

My first reaction, upon learning that the Republic of the Marshall Islands — former U.S. territory, still ravaged and radioactive, the site of 67 H-bomb tests between 1946 and 1958 — has filed lawsuits against the nine nations that possess nuclear weapons demanding that they eliminate their arsenals, as per the provisions of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, was cringing disbelief. Are they serious? I couldn't imagine an action more futile.

But the disbelief was mixed with hope, and the hope remains vibrant as the world marks the 70th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the launching of the geopolitics of M.A.D. (Mutually Assured Destruction). Could hope possibly be more painful?

The anti-nuke lawsuits were filed in April 2014, in both U.S. Federal Court and the International Court of Justice in The Hague. It was no big surprise when the U.S. suit was dismissed some months ago due to being "speculative" and because the Marshall Islands "lacks standing" to bring the suit.

Yeah, an upstart nation of no international significance. All the Marshall Islands did was to serve as an expendable swath of atolls in the middle of nowhere, a site ideal to absorb multiple megatons of nuclear testing over a dozen years. The islands' inhabitants were, in the racist parlance of the time, simple "savages" whose culture, whose very lives, had far less value than the technological advancements the testing yielded. Cancer, birth defects and other consequences of radiation are the lasting results, but who cares? Three decades ago, the U.S. settled its genocidal debt to the islanders with a payment of \$150 million "for all claims, past, present and future." This pittance — this nuisance settlement — is, of course, long gone. Too bad.

"What many Americans seem to want to forget," wrote scholar Sandra Crismon, as quoted recently by Robert Alvarez in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, "is that for the Marshallese, nuclear testing is not a historical event, as they continue to deal with the huge environmental and human health costs."

But their lawsuits in the two courts, with a decision still pending from the ICJ, isn't seeking additional compensation. The suits merely seek to hold the nuclear-armed nations accountable to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which calls for the dismantling of all nuclear weapons. How did that small provision get overlooked? Five of these nations — the U.S., U.K., France, Russia, and China — are signatories to the agreement. The other four — Israel,

India, Pakistan and North Korea — though they've snubbed the treaty, are nonetheless accountable to international law, the lawsuit maintains.

If nothing else, the tiny island nation is standing eyeball to eyeball with superpower arrogance and crippled morality.

As Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif wrote last week in *The Guardian*:

“One of the many ironies of history is that non-nuclear-weapon states, like Iran, have actually done far more for the cause of non-proliferation in practice than nuclear-weapon states have done on paper. Iran and other nuclear have-nots have genuinely ‘walked the walk’ in seeking to consolidate the non-proliferation regime. Meanwhile, states actually possessing these destructive weapons have hardly even ‘talked the talk,’ while completely brushing off their disarmament obligations under the non-proliferation treaty.”

History's conquerors will not be the ones who free humanity from its suicidal vise. This is the paradox. The transition we have to make must emerge beyond the institutions that have trapped us.

Nuclear weaponry is the outcome of 10,000 years of human experimentation with war, outside the circle of life. The institutions we've built, the logic we've adhered to, lead us nowhere, except to more of the same and worse. Desperate as we are to keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons, we devote billions of dollars annually to upgrading our own. There are still nearly 16,000 nuclear weapons on the planet, some 1,800 on Cold War-era hair-trigger alert. We've been on the brink of self-annihilation for 70 years. What sanity can we access to save ourselves?

“Everything turned red — the ocean, the fish, the sky and my grandfather's net. And we were 200 miles away from ground zero. A memory that can never be erased.”

These are the words of Tony DeBrum, minister of foreign affairs for the Republic of the Marshall Islands, who, Alvarez tells us in his *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* essay, addressed the recent Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference. DeBrum was 9, out fishing with his grandfather, on March 1, 1954, when the [Castle Bravo](#) blast — all 15 megatons of it, the largest U.S. nuclear test ever — was detonated on Bikini Atoll. To its innocent witnesses, it must have foretold the end of the world.

The Marshall Islands lawsuits ask: If not us, who? If not now, when? These are the questions asked by those who have no choice. That means all of us should be asking them.

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