

T News and Views on the Pacific Islands OK BLONG PASIFIK

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Remembering The Marshall Islands

Written By | Dr. Jane Goodall

As a result of nuclear testing on the Marshall Islands 60 years ago, many Islanders still suffer today. Yet, few Americans know about this shameful chapter of history. June 30, which marks a painful anniversary for many in the South Pacific, is just another day for those unaware of the atrocities that took place there. This year, I hope the anniversary might open the eyes of people in America and around the world: We must acknowledge the damage done in the past and rise up out of our apathy to ensure such horrors are not perpetrated again.

I became aware of the nuclear testing program initiated after World War II from a friend who witnessed the aftermath of the devastation first hand. Rick Asselta was sent to the Marshall Islands as a Peace Corps volunteer to help comfort islanders whose homes and lives were destroyed by the testing. Between 1946 and 1958, the American military tested 67 nuclear weapons at Bikini and Eniwetok. Prior to the first of these tests, the islanders were evacuated to other atolls, more than 100 miles away, and, as a precaution, the inhabitants of three other atolls were moved temporarily.

In 1952, the first hydrogen bomb was tested -- it was some 750 times larger than the Hiroshima bomb. In 1954, an even larger hydrogen bomb was detonated. On the eve of this test,

code-named Bravo, weather reports indicated that atmospheric conditions were deteriorating, and on the morning of the test, the winds were blowing strongly toward a number of U.S. ships as well as several inhabited islands, including Rongelap and Utrik. Nevertheless, despite the clear danger to the people on these islands, the bomb, 1,000 times the strength of the Hiroshima bomb, was detonated. Great clouds of gritty, white ash rained down on several atolls, affecting many people, including some American weathermen.

It would be two days before people were moved from Rongelap, the worst affected island, and another day passed before Utrik was evacuated. The islanders suffered skin burns, and their hair fell out. Yet, in a statement

to the press, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission stated that some Americans and Marshallese were "unexpectedly exposed to some radioactivity. There were no burns. All were reported well." Subsequently, the commission drafted a report, not publicly released, in which it concluded that the Bravo fallout may have contaminated as many as 18 atolls and islands. Some years after that, an additional survey by the U.S. Department of Energy revealed that yet other atolls and islands had been affected by one or more of the tests, including five that were inhabited.



U.S. Air Force photo via The Encyclopedia Britannica Online

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Pacific Peoples' Partnership
407-620 View Street
Victoria BC, Canada, V8W 1J6
Phone 250 · 381 · 4131
www.pacificpeoplespartnership.org

WHO WE ARE

Established in 1975, Pacific Peoples' Partnership is a unique non-governmental, non-profit organization working with communities and organizations in the South and North Pacific to support shared aspirations for peace, cultural integrity, social justice, human dignity, and environmental sustainability by:

- Promoting increased understanding among Canadians on issues of importance to the people of the Pacific islands.
- Advocating for social, political, and economic policy change at all levels.
- Fostering the development of sustainable communities in the Pacific.
- Facilitating links between indigenous peoples of the Pacific islands and Aboriginal peoples of Canada.
- Strengthening relations between Canadian and Pacific island communities and civil society organizations.

Continued on Page 7

Rising Tides !

CANADA, KYOTO AND THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

Written By | David Walker
PPP Programme Officer

The irony of North American and European obsession with the “war on terror” is that it serves only to distract politicians from a more profound threat to global security. The most likely cause of future conflicts, social unrest and militarism is going to be global warming.

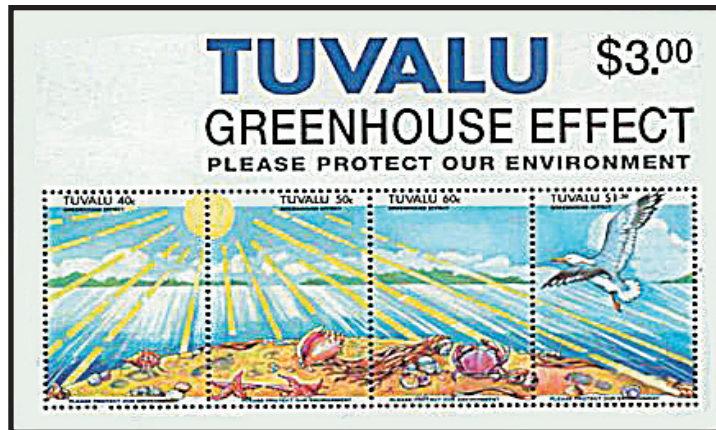
Recent decades have seen record high global surface temperatures, an increase of one degree Fahrenheit alone in the 20th century. The years 1998, 2002 and 2003 were the three warmest years recorded back to the 1850's. Scientific consensus is that while natural cycles can account for some of the variability, the total warming can only be explained by taking into account human emissions of greenhouse gases (GHCs).

The latest data on sea levels show a rise of at least 2.1 centimetres per year. In low lying area of the world, a 15-centimetre rise over 100 years could overwhelm many heavily populated coastlines. In fact, this process appears to be accelerating. Besides obvious effects of inundation and erosion, there will be disastrous changes in food production and vital economies such as forestry, fisheries, transportation and the irreplaceable loss of biodiversity. The impact on Pacific Island nations is measurable even now, and in some states the effects are already alarming. Any changes, even small ones, have a significant impact on the largely indigenous population.

The main industries driving local island economies – fishing, agriculture and tourism – will be devastated by flooding, drought, violent storms, destroyed coral reefs, and depleted fish populations, compromised sources of fresh water and eroding coastlines. Human health is at risk too as diseases such as malaria, cholera; typhoid and Dengue fever are tied to climate variability.

Tuvalu – Creating Climate Refugees

The Island of Tuvalu has been one of the first victims of this rise in sea levels. The highest point of land is only 5 metres above sea level and its land area is 26Km². Half its 11,000 people are crammed on the 30-hectare Funafuti Atoll giving it a population density rivalling Hong Kong. Recently the island experienced record high tides of 3.2 metres that inundated much of the state,



damaging or destroying already sparse infrastructure such as telephone services and flooding the island's only airport. Already faced rising waters that are 5 centimetres over the global average, sea levels are predicted to rise close to a metre in this century. The islanders of Tuvalu are living on borrowed time.

The only solution, according to the local government, is to transport the entire population overseas. So far, 5000 native Tuvaluans have already relocated to New Zealand. The Government of Australia has been approached but has rebuffed the efforts of Tuvaluan leaders to allow special visas against the time when they will finally need to leave their island. They are amongst the first of the world's Climate Refugees. The Tokelau Islands and the Marshall Islands are facing the same imminent threat.

Kiribati is a Microcosm of What is Coming

Kiribati is one of the smallest, most isolated countries in the world. Ninety-two thousand people inhabit only 717 sq km spread over 33 islands and five million sq km of ocean.

As most marine organisms live within narrow temperature regimes, one of the more visible effects of warming waters has been the dying off of coral reefs. As the water warms, the coral eject their symbiotic algae, then whiten or “bleach” and subsequently die. The coral reefs, in addition to being a primary source of food and livelihoods for islanders, also serve an important protective function without which these almost sea level atolls would face even more pronounced erosion and loss of land from storms.

Also affected will be tourism, as not many will pay to view dead reefs. On the Island State of Palau and in the Cook Islands, tourism makes up as much as 40 percent of gross domestic product. Other areas where this phenomenon is taking place at an accelerated pace are parts of French Polynesia and Fiji.

The general increasing sea surface temperatures and levels when combined with the increasing strength and severity of such shorter-term climate effects as the El Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO) have led to unusually high tides and more powerful storms, the duration and strength of which have increased by about 50% over the last three decades. Whole villages on Kiribati have already been relocated and two local landmarks – the small atoll islands of Tarawa and Bikeman – are now completely submerged. As the salt water pushes up into the freshwater lens, groundwater is becoming contaminated and crops are dying from salt poisoning. This process is being hastened by the over pumping of local aquifers as islanders overuse their supplies owing to ever-increasing periods of decreased precipitation. In some areas, farmers are forced to grow subsistence crops such as taro and yams in tin containers in order to avoid salt and to conserve water.

Strong Resistance to Change in Some Industrialized Countries

Despite mounting evidence, countries such as Canada and the United States have continued

unabated in their contribution of greenhouse gases by way of our ever-increasing hunger for fossil fuels.

Despite the fact that Canada is one of the world's largest energy consumers per capita, using roughly 7700 litres of oil per person per year, we seem to be losing the political will to proceed with a long-term commitment to real reductions in emissions as required by the Kyoto Accord. Since 1990, energy consumption in Canada has grown by at least 13% and emissions have risen 17%.

While other industrialized countries such as Japan and parts of the European Union are actually meeting or surpassing their Kyoto commitments, Canadians are being informed by the Honourable Rona Ambrose, Canada's new Environment Minister, that the very goals we as a nation helped develop and signed onto are unreachable. Taken in tandem with the recent refusal of Canada to sign the final U.N. Declaration on Indigenous Rights, our leadership seems intent on stepping away from our global responsibilities and aligning itself with the US and Australia's largely militaristic, interventionist approach to world issues, driven in part by the short-sighted need for "Energy Security".

More chillingly, there seems to be a concerted effort on the parts of the US and Australia to keep the topic of climate change from becoming a national debate. Stories of government-backed editing, censoring and even outright gagging are increasingly coming to light. In the US

earlier in 2006, top climate specialists, James Hansen and Robert Corell (the latter being the primary author of the

Arctic Climate Change Report), have complained of muzzling. In Australia, three top climate experts were repeatedly gagged under orders from their own Prime Minister's office. Australian climate scientist, Barrie Pittock, related one specific example in which he was ordered to remove a section in a report dealing with the displacement of millions of people around the Pacific by rising sea levels, creating a "potential refugee problem for Australia."

The tragedy and irony in all this is that it is the world's most vulnerable populations, mainly indigenous, that, having been the least responsible for creating the problem, will feel the consequences of climate change most immediately and dramatically. However, the rest of the world will not be far behind.

David Walker worked for 10 years as a consultant to Provincial, Federal, First Nations and Community agencies on basic, applied research and restoration programs involving Fisheries /Forestry Interaction associated with Long and Short Term Climate Change, Watershed Use and Resource Management policy and planning.

WHO'S WHO

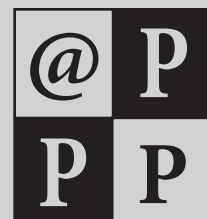
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OPEN YOUR EYES. SHARE YOUR SKILLS. TEST YOUR LIMITS.

.....► FREEPORT MINE FACES INVESTIGATIONS AND DIVESTMENT

Written By | Abigail Abrash Walton
and David Meek

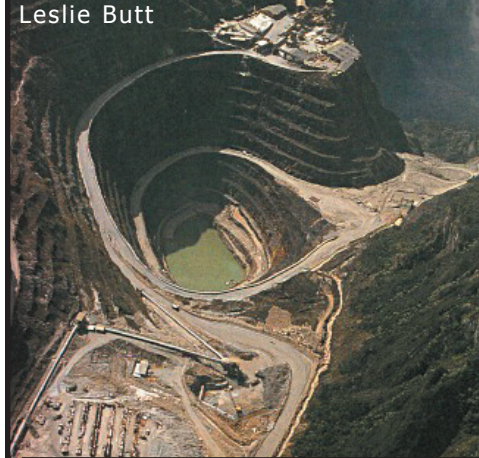
It appears that Freeport McMoRan Copper and Gold, Inc.'s 'iron curtain' of impunity carefully constructed around the company's West Papua mining operations is developing significant cracks. Since the start of mining activity in the early 1970s, Freeport has largely succeeded in blocking outside scrutiny of its impact on communities and ecosystems within its massive project area. The Indonesian government and armed forces have cooperated in a sustained effort to keep the area closed from independent investigation, turning away United Nations human rights monitors, lawyers representing local community members, journalists, environmental people, and others.

In an unprecedented avalanche of attention, Freeport has become the focus of numerous investigations by Indonesia's Ministry of Environment, the Indonesian parliament, and the U.S. Justice Department and U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Major shareholders, such as the New York City and Norwegian government pension funds, have taken concrete action in response to Freeport's governance and environmental practices. The legal and economic consequences that Freeport currently faces are arguably more severe than in the mid-1990s. The corporation's mining project continues to pose unreasonable environmental, health or safety hazards with respect to the rivers that are being impacted by the tailings, the surrounding terrestrial ecosystem, and the local inhabitants.

During the past year, a series of investigative newspaper articles and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports has been published, exposing Freeport's payments to the Indonesian military (TNI) as well as the environmental degradation wrought by the corporation's mining practices. What makes some of these current exposés so significant is that their data are derived from Freeport's own documents. These company reports, including financial audits and environmental impact assessments, were conducted either by Freeport or its subcontractors, documenting illegal activity at a systemic level.

In a lengthy front-page investigative news article on December 27, 2005, *The New York Times* cited company

Photo by
Leslie Butt



THE RIVER DOWNSTREAM OF THE FREEPORT MINE HAS BEEN POISONED AND SILTED AND THE AREFURA SEA HAS BEEN HEAVILY POLLUTED AS A RESULT OF MINING.

documents outlining the massive extent to which Freeport management has been allocating money to individual Indonesian military and police officials. These records document that, between 1998 and 2004, the corporation paid well over US\$20 million to military and police generals, colonels, majors and captains, and entire military units. A Freeport spokesperson, asserting that the payments were not inappropriate, said "We don't bribe...assisting security personnel on duty is just normal. If you give some food to your starving guard, that is normal, right." However, *The Times* maintains that the company used these types of 'necessary expenditures' as an ostensibly legitimate means of funneling payments of up to \$150,000 for individual officer's annual food stipends (a seemingly odd allowance considering Freeport provides three meals a day to its military guards).

Though reportedly it is against Indonesian law to make payments to individual military officers, Freeport has countered that payments to the TNI were required by the Contract of Work (CoW) that the company originally negotiated with the Indonesian government in 1967 and reaffirmed in 1991. However, after reviewing each contract, *The Times* and other investigators have determined that there were no clauses necessitating payments to the military. Adding to the media dialogue concerning these allegations of bribery and extortion, Erry Riyana Hardjapamekas, the vice

chairman of Indonesia's anticorruption commission, publicly affirmed that if Freeport financially compensated individual officers, "that's corruption." He also indicated that his department would assist any investigation by a U.S. government agency into these payments.

Now the U.S. Justice Department is investigating whether Freeport's business practices violate the U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. Indeed, U.S. Senator Joseph Biden, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stated in January 2006 that these "large payments by Freeport officials directly to individual Indonesian Army officers are highly irregular. It is time for the Justice Department and the Congress thoroughly to investigate Freeport's business practices in Indonesia."

In June 2006, the Norwegian government made international headlines when it announced its decision to exclude Freeport stock from its US\$230 billion pension fund. This decision was based on a judgment that Freeport's dumping of toxic mine waste into local river systems has caused environmental damage that is "extensive, long-term and irreversible," with "considerable negative consequences for the indigenous peoples residing in the area."

Sharing similar concerns about risks to shareholders resulting from Freeport management's practices, the New York City Comptroller's Office, which manages the city's five pension funds with roughly a US\$37 million investment in the corporation, has taken a variety of actions aimed at making its operations more transparent. The New York City Employees Retirement System has filed shareholder resolutions annually during the past three years calling on Freeport management to report to shareholders about the company's relationship with the TNI. Earlier this year, the Comptroller requested the SEC to investigate Freeport for providing false proxy statements to shareholders in violation of the Security Exchange Act. An SEC investigation is now underway.

As investor and public pressure builds, the Indonesian parliament declared in May that within two months it would begin renegotiating Freeport's 1991 CoW. The impetus to reevaluate the CoW is related to the contention that the

company should be paying significantly higher taxes to the government. In 2005, the company reportedly paid the country US\$1 billion in tax revenues. However, Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla has alleged that the “country should have received revenues three times what the company actually paid” because gold prices recently have hit a 25-year high, and Freeport’s profits have doubled within the last quarter. The Indonesian House of Representatives has established a Working Committee on Freeport and wants to increase the central government’s ownership of Freeport shares from the present 10 percent to 50 percent. However, the administration of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono itself reportedly is only looking for a 10-20 percent increase. According to Indonesian Energy and Mineral Resource Minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro the renegotiation will begin once the government completes its evaluation of the corporation’s community development programs, and assesses the current mining practices and level of production.”

At the start of 2006, the Indonesian Ministry of Environment launched an unprecedented investigation into Freeport’s mining practices. The investigation, carried out by 24 independent experts, confirmed that the Ajkwa River Estuary used by Freeport to dispose of thousands of tons of mining waste a day has been severely damaged, that Freeport was violating Indonesia’s 2001 Water Quality Regulations, and that the company had been asked to provide an alternative method for waste transport. Although for decades the company has been using the river as a repository for its toxic tailings, the Environment Minister Rachmat Witoelar said that Indonesian law banned the riverine disposal of waste in 1990, and that the corporation has no special legal dispensation to do so.

In late March 2006, Witoelar indicated that he expected Freeport to receive the worst environmental rating possible, and that the company must clean up its practices or face court action. The minister stated that “We want Freeport to start following the rules here. Freeport shouldn’t be its own country within a country. There are 500 other companies like Freeport here that follow the rules.”

Despite the tough rhetoric, the ministry’s position is not totally clear. Approximately six weeks after publicly castigating the company, Witoelar stated that the government’s investigation had found that there was only minor damage

done to the river and that Freeport was “abiding by the law, following all directions.” Those watchdogs who have been monitoring Freeport for years aren’t buying his apparent change of heart in holding Freeport accountable. As Farah Sofa, the deputy director of the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (WALHI), said in reference to the government’s investigation, “We think it is a waste of time. Freeport has long been on the wrong side of the law. There needs to be direct consequences for the company’s actions.”

Up to its usual tactics, Freeport seems to be trying to use “quiet diplomacy” with some critics while attempting to divide and conquer others. When 15 local Papuan legislative councilors serving on the Special Committee for Freeport announced their intention to travel to company headquarters in New Orleans to highlight Papuans’ concerns about Freeport’s practices, local community leaders held a press conference in Jakarta to oppose speaking to Freeport on management’s home turf. Amungme community leader and 2001 Goldman Environmental Prize winner, Yosepha “Mama” Alomang stated, “I urge the councilors not to go abroad to lobby or negotiate with Freeport bosses. I stress to everybody that every dialog should be held in Papua and involve locals who are suffering from the company’s operations. Or else, the likelihood of the company’s operations being shut down will only become greater.” Kamoro community leader Peter Yanwarin and Timika church leader Father John Djonga said such a visit would be undignified. Djonga stated that “they (Freeport) are the guests and we are the hosts. They are the ones who should respect us by coming here and having an equal and honorable dialog.”

If the massive pressure on Freeport continues, perhaps we’ll next be reporting on the genuine dialogue that affected communities have requested for more than a decade.

Abigail Abrash Walton is on faculty in Antioch University New England’s Department of Environmental Studies. She served as coordinator of a joint Indonesian/International Independent Assessment Team, convened at the request of U.S.-based institutional investors in Freeport McMoRan Copper & Gold, Inc., to examine human rights conditions in the Freeport project area. She is the author of Development Aggression: Observations on Human Rights Conditions in the PT

Freeport Indonesia Contract of Work Areas and Incidents of Military Violence Against Indigenous Women in Irian Jaya (West Papua), Indonesia, published by the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights (Washington, D.C.) as well as numerous articles about the Amungme, Kamoro, Freeport, West Papua and U.S. foreign policy.

David Meek is a master’s degree candidate in conservation biology and advocacy at The Center for Tropical Ecology and Conservation at Antioch University, New England. His research interests focus on traditional people in the context of how their economic needs influence their interactions with the environment, and how these practices affect efforts at environmental conservation.

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What Happened in the Solomon Islands



Compiled by | Kelly Kerr,
Communications & Media Relations, PPP

It would have been easy for readers to miss news of the April 2006 violence that broke out in the Solomon Islands because the crisis was under-reported by most mainstream media. The following article includes some background information, a summary of events, and personal reports from people who were there.

Violence began on April 19, after a general election resulted in Snyder Rini being declared Prime Minister, winning 27 of 50 seats. Hundreds of protestors marched to the parliament buildings in Honiara, the capital. Rioting and looting was triggered by a general feeling of Solomon Islanders that the election outcome was the result of bribery and corruption within Government. The riots destroyed most of Chinatown and led to Rini's resignation on April 26th, eight days after he was elected and just before a confidence vote that he was expected to loose was scheduled in parliament. He was replaced in May by Manasseh Sogavare.

Rini is accused of having close ties to the Taiwanese government, accepting bribes on behalf of the Asian business owners and being linked to former Prime Minister Kemakeza, whose administration was known for corruption. Chinese merchants were targeted by the angry mob, whose rage seemed to be focused on the new Chinese businesses, with the older, established Chinese stores being left fairly intact. This most recent violence is another example of the racial tension that has been building for many years between Solomon Islanders and the Chinese community. It resulted in the evacuation of many Asian community members, who fled back to their home countries after having lost all of their possessions, and in some cases their businesses.

Bishop Terry Brown is a Canadian who has lived in the Solomon Islands for many years as a vocal catalyst for change through the Church of Melanesia. He has been an insightful observer of events as they have unfolded during 2006. In the comments compiled below, he refers to RAMSI, Australia's Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, which has a prominent presence in the country.

An article appearing in the Solomon Star on January 18th, 2006, discussed the influence of RAMSI "guided" economic and fiscal policies. Brown notes:

"...increasing poverty and unemployment, high school fees, a downward-spiralling economy, higher inflation and lower incomes, declining medical services, ongoing corruption in Government ministries, lack of planning and implementation of how Solomon Islanders will competently run all parts of their own government, crumbling infrastructure, millions and millions of RAMSI funds spend on Australians with the money going back to



Honiara at height of rioting.
Photo by Wong Yun Kong

Australia with minimum cash benefit for Solomon Islanders, continued centralizing of everything in Honiara, etc."

During the April riots, he informed PPP:

"Rioting is continuing in Honiara this morning, with Chinese businesses targeted, especially new developments. Pacific Casino is now under attack and marchers are headed for Parliament. All are demanding the resignation of the new Prime Minister. He refuses to resign. (If he continues to refuse, the Parliament building will probably be torched.)

"Decades of bitterness against the Chinese community for its wealth, its abusive behaviour towards Melanesian staff, its "buying" of successive national governments (including, most likely, this one), its apparent immunity from RAMSI investigation ... its involvement in highly lucrative resource extraction, the large sums of money taken out of the country illegally, etc., etc., finally came to the fore, sparked by the result of yesterday's Prime Ministerial election. The talk here is of "stage two" in the "ethnic tension" process, Solomon Islands vs. Chinese."

In an email dated July 6th, 2006, Bishop Brown provided these final insights:

"The Sogavare government is doing better than I expected. I think RAMSI has to switch from its fairly exclusive emphasis on justice, governance and financial accountability issues (all quite important) to issues of development as well (local income generation, health, infrastructure, education). An enormous amount of money is available to build new prisons and pay Australian lawyers to come argue cases in the Solomons, but money is not available for keeping people out of jail, for health and education, etc. However, I do not advocate the pull-out of RAMSI."



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Remembering the Marshall Islands

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Three years after Bravo, in 1955, the inhabitants of Utrik were allowed to return because their island "was only slightly contaminated and considered safe." Two years later, Rongelap was declared safe "in spite of slight lingering radiation" and the people returned. A chilling report was issued at this time by Brookhaven National Laboratory scientists, who stated that although the contamination was considered perfectly safe "the levels of activity are higher than those found in other inhabited locations in the world. The habitation of these people on the island will afford most valuable ecological radiation data on human beings."

In 1963, nine years after their exposure to Bravo, the first thyroid tumors began appearing among the people of Rongelap. Thirteen years later, 20 of the 29 Rongelap children who were under 10 years old at the time of Bravo had developed these tumors. At the same time, it became clear that people exposed to lower levels of radiation were still at risk —there was simply a longer latency period before health problems appeared.

Eleven years after the last nuclear tests, in 1969, the commission announced that Bikini was safe for rehabilitation. However, the Bikini council was not satisfied by this assurance and only a few families returned to their homes. How fortunate -- six years later, a U.S. Department of the Interior official reported "higher levels of radioactivity than originally thought" -- some ground wells were too radioactive for safe use, and several types of staple foods had to be prohibited. Six years after returning home, the few families who had returned to Bikini were moved yet again when additional testing showed that they had sustained an "incredible" 75 percent increase in radioactive cesium.

Before staging this ghastly series of tests in the Marshall Islands, home of a gentle people with an ancient culture, the United States, in its role as administrator of the area, undertook to "protect the inhabitants against the loss of their lands and resources". Unfortunately, this promise was hardly fulfilled. Eventually, in 1977, Congress approved a nuclear cleanup of Enewetak Atoll. Of course, compensation in dollar amounts has been negotiated for the abused and exploited islanders, though not nearly enough.

Nor was nuclear testing the only horrifying test program inflicted on the Marshall Islands. Project Shipboard Hazards and Defense was part of a United States chemical and biological warfare test program that was conducted during the 1960s. Project SHAD was designed to test the vulnerability of U.S. warships to attacks by biological and chemical agents and to develop procedures to respond to such attacks. In 1968, biological agents, live staphylococcal enterotoxin type B, Bacillus globigii and uranine dye, were sprayed in aerosolized form, not only over six military ships, but also over part of the Enewetak Atoll. Those tests were linked to a sudden nationwide outbreak of a very severe flu-like disease in the Marshall Islands, which caused some deaths.

Subsequently, many U.S. servicemen complained of health problems they believed had resulted from their involvement in SHAD. It was the complaints of these veterans that eventually led to the above disclosures by the U.S. Department of Defense, through the Freedom of Information Act.

I have a small wooden carving made by an old man who, despite the risk of radiation, returned to his island. I carry it with me as a symbol of the indomitable human spirit, and also as a reminder of the atrocities that we must, somehow, prevent from ever happening again.

Jane Goodall is a U.N. Messenger of Peace and a recipient of the Gandhi-King Peace Award for Nonviolence. To learn more about the Jane Goodall Institute, visit www.janegoodall.org.

Edited for size only, this article appears courtesy of the San Francisco Chronicle, June 30, 2006.

NV Bikini Islanders Skeptical of Plans to Clean Up Atoll *New Scientist*, June 30, 2006

Already victims of one nuclear experiment, the people of Marshall Islands are understandably skeptical of the latest plans to reduce the dangers of a homeland beset with radioactive contamination.

To encourage the remaining islanders and their descendants to return, scientists at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California have been investigating ways to prevent the caesium-137 in the soil from accumulating in the islanders' food.

They discovered that applying potassium fertiliser to soil reduces 20-fold the amount of caesium-137 taken up by coconut trees. The effect lasts for up to 10 years, they say in the *Journal of Environmental Radioactivity* (vol 88, p 251). "It would be hard to overstate the importance of this assurance to returning populations," the researchers conclude.

That is not, however, how surviving Bikinians see it. According to their representative, Jack Niedenthal, treatment with potassium would still leave much of the island contaminated beyond US radiation safety limits. "This still looks too much like an experiment to most of the islanders," he told *New Scientist*.

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SOLOMON ISLANDS MEMORIES

Written by | Eric St. Pierre
Indigenous Peoples Abroad Program Intern

When most people consider the Solomon Islands, first thoughts are usually palm trees, sunny tropical beaches, world renowned diving and the Melanesian headhunting culture of days past. Others who have followed current events in this South Pacific country recognize that ethnic and civil conflict, land disputes, environmental degradation, unsustainable logging projects, the looming perils of HIV/AIDS and the implications of increasing youth unemployment are more the reality for the half-million Solomon Islanders.

When I chose an internship there with Pacific Peoples Partnership, I was excited about this corner of the world and how I could help. I had just finished my Bachelors degree in political science and had spent time in East Africa and the Middle East. Therefore, I felt prepared for the six-month opportunity that the Indigenous Peoples Abroad Programme (IPAP) provided.

My placement was with the Department of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace in the capital city, Honiara. It is one of the world's only government ministries devoted to reconciling an ethnic conflict. With this internship, I

shared my understanding of conflict to benefit the department and act as a skill-building experience for myself. What I learned was ever-lasting.

Within a month I attended a Peace Stakeholders Conference on Malaita Island. There I learned first hand the challenges posed by land ownership and how dual land claims can insinuate towards ethnic conflict. I appreciate that there is no overnight solution to the land disputes on many islands but I am equally confident that steps can be taken to address existing tensions.

My last week in Honiara, the Solomon government announced it would establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address the 1998-2003 ethnic conflict. The goal of the Commission is to bring both Guadalcanal and Malaitan peoples together by forgiving those involved. Tensions should be reduced through truth telling and by punishing those most implicated in the conflict which killed 200 and left 20,000 displaced.

During my stay, I worked on a research project, looking at international models from East Timor and South Africa as well as at how Indigenous societies solved conflicts through restorative justice initiatives. My suggestions were put together in a report highlighting what can be learned from other Indigenous cultures and also how a Commission in the Solomon Islands could be created, one that would be in accord with Solomon cultural traditions and *Kastom*.

Part way through my internship I was informed that IPAP's funding had been cut and that I would be the last intern to be placed abroad. Despite this sad news and the Honiara riots in April, my time in the Solomon Islands was rich indeed. I learned to speak Solomon Pidgin, experienced social and environmental issues first hand as well as the most inclusive welcoming into peoples homes and hearts. I even had a friend's baby boy named in my honour. I am already planning my return.



Currently in a graduate diploma of journalism at Montreal's Concordia University, I am applying for a grant to return to the Solomon Islands, to promote journalism that will assist development projects. The proposal outlines how I will work in newsprint (*Solomon Star*) and radio broadcasting (Solo Isl Broadcast Corporation) in conjunction with the Department of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace. The areas of my coverage will focus on developments in peace building, efforts at reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) and other development themes such as environmental security, land disputes, and more.

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Thank You!

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