

**Statement of the Honorable John M. Silk,  
Minister of Foreign Affairs  
Republic of the Marshall Islands  
Presented to the House Committee on Natural Resources Democrats Forum  
“Confronting a Rising Tide: The Climate Refugee Crisis”  
May 17, 2016**

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Chairman Raul M. Grijalva, Members of the Committee, Ladies and Gentlemen:

**Introduction**

On behalf of the Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, I wish to thank you for convening this forum on “*Confronting a Rising Tide: The Climate Refugee Crisis*”.

The Republic of the Marshall Islands is a low-lying island nation – our exclusive economic zone is 2 million square kilometers – roughly the size of Mexico. And our remote islands have no higher ground – an average height of about five feet above sea level – places so narrow you can often stand in the lagoon and see the ocean waves on the other side.

**The Marshall Islands-US Relationship**

The Republic of the Marshall Islands and the United States of America have a longstanding relationship that has spanned over 7 decades. Our relationship has taken us from the end of WWII - when American soldiers liberated the Marshall Islands from violent atrocities, and as a proving ground for 67 US nuclear tests - to today, where hundreds of Marshallese men and women serve alongside American soldiers, where we have strategic bilateral partnership through our joint Compact of Free Association – the Marshall Islands hosts the US Kwajalein atoll strategic missile defense site, and our citizens – nearly a quarter of our population - live, work and attend school throughout the US. In a very real sense – our security is also your security.

## **Climate-Driven Migration**

Climate-driven migration is already a reality in the Marshall Islands, and the future poses far greater threats. This poses security concerns for the US, and the already-evident “Compact Impact” economic burden within the US could be far worse. Both the Marshall Islands and US have at hand an important bilateral tool in our Compact, which, if strengthened and well-focused, could boost our resilience and strengthen our future.

We are now realizing a growing rate of outmigration into the US – and while there are a wide range of drivers, increasingly we find that concerns over climate impacts are influencing mobility, as our local communities struggle to cope with more frequent and more serious coastal flooding. Right now, half of our population is experiencing severe drought conditions.

In our culture, the land defines one’s self – that without our land, you are not a whole person. The Bikini people know this – they have remained in exile since the U.S. nuclear testing started in 1946 – and many were ultimately resettled on Kili island– a place which also had a higher degree of environmental risk than elsewhere in the Marshall Islands. As seas have risen, this already-vulnerable island is fast becoming uninhabitable. And as the Bikinians see nowhere else to turn yet again within the Marshall Islands – they have petitioned Congress to revise their trust fund to resettle within the U.S. This issue is addressed in Senate Bill 2360 currently in the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. What will be the reply of Congress? And if this is only a question of one community today, albeit in a unique circumstance – what could happen to the entire Marshall Islands within my lifetime, and that of my children?

We do have a degree of national action to tackle climate in place – for example, enhanced action on disaster risk policies, a detailed national comprehensive development plan and water security initiatives – but at present our domestic climate action is only fragmented, and our present capacity remains seriously inadequate to tackle future risks.

The bilateral Compact Agreement is absolutely clear on our right to enter the US to live, work, and study without a visa. However, we hear sharply of “Compact Impact” fiscal and social challenges from some host states within the US – a “front page” issue in Honolulu and elsewhere. In the next decade and beyond – the scale of climate-driven migration pressure from the Pacific could make these today’s Compact Impact issues seem “quaint” by comparison.

Climate change is a serious issue – but one of many. We – both the Marshall Islands and the U.S. – need to do a much better job at jumpstarting economic growth and boosting progress on basic social issues. But the future risks of climate change – even just the economic calculations alone – threaten to wipe the slate clean of whatever progress we may achieve.

### **The Paris Agreement**

What then you might ask of global action – of the Paris Agreement on climate change, where the Marshall Islands, the US and so many others stood strong of ambitious and far-reaching action? We stand strongly behind it. But we know for a fact it is not enough – and the built-in timeline to ramp up effort is both a fundamental lifeline but also a severe risk. Even if and as we achieve the higher range of ambition and emissions cuts – as a low-lying island we will still face severe climate-driven challenges, worse than what we see today.

### **The Compact of Free Association**

Nearly 70% of our national budget mainly comes from the US payments under the Compact Agreement. And we – both nations - are still building infrastructure today, as though climate change did not exist. While the RMI and Interior Department have expressed interest in prioritizing and building in climate considerations to our Compact with the adoption of JEMFAC Resolution 2015-2, we already have decades of US-funded investment in place including the Kwajalein military base, all of it highly exposed to climate impacts.

The most effective means to address climate is not just through global action but local resilience in all aspects. Key aspects of our bilateral Compact Agreement expire in 2023 – and while we are already warned of a financial step-down, so much more of this challenge is also about achieving positive results with what we already have at hand. What indeed will be the future of our bilateral relationship after 2023? And how – if at all – will this address climate change? Could it possibly benefit the U.S. risk possible political ambiguity in a vast U.S.-controlled security zone in Micronesia extending almost right to the South China Sea? Or to flood the U.S. and elsewhere with refugees – uniquely from US Associated States in the Pacific north, but also the wider region and world? This is not the future that I want for my country, for my children and grandchildren.

I would suggest that to stem the tide of climate migration - our mutual consideration of a post-2023 bilateral relationship, and indeed our management options now, should directly address climate risks and do a better job to build our resilience. And here – some creative and strategic thought, and hard work, is truly needed by both nations.

Thank you very much.