

MICRO

Reform

The US has cast off its trusteeship of tiny Micronesia. Nic Maclellan contends that the consequences of this end to 'neo-colonialism' will be more bad than good.

Last December, just three days before Christmas, at four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon, the United Nations Security Council voted to terminate its trusteeship over the islands of Micronesia. The UN's decision received little coverage in the international media—but will have longlasting effects for the island nations of the Pacific. The vote ends United Nations oversight of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas. The people of Belau, whose anti-nuclear constitution has been a thorn in US Pacific policy for over a decade, remain under the last surviving trusteeship in the world.

For years, the Soviet Union had refused to go along with US designs for the small island states of Micronesia, blocking a Security Council vote to terminate the UN trusteeship. But with Cuba the only dissenting voice, the vote was rushed through at a time when world attention was focused on the Gulf. During the euphoria of US-Soviet detente in the lead-up to war against Iraq, the Soviet Union was unwilling to stand in the way of US policy for Micronesia.

With the support of the nuclear powers, and encouragement from Australia and New Zealand, the Security Council ended the trusteeship—even though many people in the region were opposed. The Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, one of four entities making up the trusteeship, was not even formally notified of the vote. According to Marianas' Governor Larry Guerrero: "The time is not right for Security Council termination of the trust for our people. We still desire to have the protection afforded us by the United Nations." He claimed that the United States did not respect the Marianas' right to full internal self-government or the country's 200-mile exclusive Economic Zone, and that the US had not fulfilled the provisions of the trusteeship agreement.

It may seem strange that these countries seek to remain under a trusteeship, when all the others created after World War Two have ended as nations have moved to self-government or independence. Although the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia were eager to end the trusteeship, the other small island nations are now deprived of the opportunity for international scrutiny through the UN.

The United Nations established the trusteeship for the islands in 1947 following the defeat of Japan. The Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), to be administered by the United States, was the only strategic trusteeship in

the world, and gave the US unlimited military rights and control over access by foreign powers. Unlike other trust territories established after World War Two, it was under the control of the UN Security Council rather than General Assembly, which allowed oversight through the UN Trusteeship Council and other UN institutions.

Under the UN trusteeship, the United States government was charged to "foster the development of government or independence...[and to] promote the economic advancement and self-sufficiency of the inhabitants". But even before the trust territory was created, the US had begun a series of atomic and hydrogen bomb tests at Bikini and Enewetak atolls in the Marshall Islands. From 1946 to 1958, the US conducted 66 atmospheric nuclear tests in the Marshalls, leaving a legacy of health and environmental effects that linger to this day.

By the early 1960s, the Kennedy Administration faced criticism of its neo-colonial policies in the Pacific, at a time when a wave of decolonisation was sweeping Africa and Asia. A Congress for the Micronesian islands was formed in 1964, but moves to full independence or self-determination foundered. The US began separate negotiations with the leaders of the Northern Marianas and, in 1975, they became a commonwealth of the United States. Throughout the 1970s, US officials negotiated with Micronesian leaders to establish self-government, but were reluctant to recognise full independence; the Micronesian islands have retained their strategic importance, from missile testing in the Marshalls to the option of using land in Belau for military bases. Critics of US policy argued that successive US administrations have used a divide and conquer strategy in order to protect US strategic interests in the islands.

The people of Belau first accepted their own constitution in 1979—but its provisions banning nuclear activity and protecting Belauan land have been a stumbling block for any agreement with the US. Belauans have had to vote three times to reaffirm their constitution, and seven times on the agreement with the US that will govern future relations—the Compact of Free Association—in a process marked by violence, corruption and the murder and suicide of the first two presidents of the country.

Both the Marshall Islands and the neighbouring Federated States of Micronesia (Pohnpei, Yap, Chuuk and Kosrae) ratified compacts which came into force in 1986. Under the compacts, the two countries receive aid from the US, while giving up control of defence and foreign policy. Both the Marshalls and FSM joined the South Pacific Forum in 1987 and established diplomatic relations with a number of countries, including Australia (which has established an embassy in Pohnpei to cover the region).

After 40 years of US administration, the former American trust territories are locked into a cycle of aid dependency. After years of benign neglect, the islands only now have the power to administer basic services that were neglected under successive US administrations. Despite a massive aid influx, social development in the small atoll nations has

not benefited all of the population; with one of the highest birth rates in the world, the Marshalls now has two out of three children malnourished, and many people with treatable diseases (for instance, 6% of the population has syphilis).

Through a Nuclear Claims Tribunal, some Marshallese can now claim compensation for the effects of nuclear tests in the 1940s and 1950s. A major radiological survey of the islands is under way as is a door to door oral survey of women on a number of atolls, to build a database on the effects of radioactivity on reproductive health.

Although the nuclear tests ended over 30 years ago, the Marshall Islands remain crucial to the nuclear arms race. The US still test-fires ballistic missiles from Vandenberg Airforce Base in California to Kwajalein atoll in the Marshalls, to establish the pinpoint accuracy needed for nuclear war fighting. Even after the Reagan era, Kwajalein retains its importance. A series of 'Star Wars' tests are currently being conducted; in January, an anti-ballistic missile fired from Kwajalein as part of the ERIS tests successfully blasted an incoming Minuteman rocket fired from California.

The social fallout from these tests has had a major impact on the Marshallese. People from around Kwajalein atoll have been relocated to Ebeye island, just a few miles from the USAKA base on Kwajalein island itself. Nearly 10,000 people live on just 72 acres of land—one of the highest population densities in the world.

The local municipal government and the Kwajalein Atoll Development Association (KADA) have made heroic efforts in improving the physical conditions on Ebeye over the last decade, after Marshallese protested against their plight. Once known as the slum of the Pacific, with poor sanitation, no regular water supply and atrocious health conditions, Ebeye now hosts its own power generation, a desalination plant for water and improved housing for some of the population. But even these improvements cannot mask the stark contrast between Ebeye and the US base at Kwajalein, home to 2-3,000 civilian contractors and US army personnel. Half the population of Ebeye is under 15, and children play on windswept concrete and tarmac streets. In contrast, Kwajalein, visible just across the water, is a transplanted piece of California, with swimming pool, baseball fields and tennis courts, manicured lawns and supermarket facilities. Marshallese workers travel by ferry or US army barge to work at the base each day, to be transported back to Ebeye at nightfall.

The ending of the trusteeship provides an opening for some Micronesians to transcend the colonial divisions that have separated them from countries in the south-west Pacific. But, as Western leaders proclaim the importance of a revitalised UN Security Council in a new world order, it's worth noting that the UN will not provide the same forum for deliberation on the affairs of these small island states.

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