



TE KAUNONO TUTARA E TE MANA TIAKI
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND IMMIGRATION
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

Remarks for the Commemoration of International Day against Nuclear Tests.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we draw this commemorative event to a close, I wish to extend my heartfelt gratitude to all who have joined us today.

Secretary General Puna, Ambassador Aini, Mr. Seru as well as the esteemed members of the Diplomatic Corps – your presence and stories of resilience has enriched this gathering. It has reminded us of the harrowing realities of nuclear testing, and the somber truth that underscores the existence of nuclear weapons.

When asked to deliver the closing remarks for today's commemoration, I thought it fitting to embed my thoughts in the powerful historical context that birthed the South Pacific Nuclear Free zone Treaty, more commonly known as the Treaty of Rarotonga in 1985, the Pacific's only existing international law to deliver a safe and peaceful environment, free from the risks associated with nuclear weapons.

The theme of *'Honouring the Past to Empower the Future'* resonates deeply this month, as we commemorate not only the UN's designated International Day against Nuclear Tests, but also the anniversary of the Rarotonga Treaty and the inaugural meeting of PIF Leaders in August 1971. This truly is an auspicious occasion and I want to thank the Secretariat for organising this event.

The genesis of the treaty lies in the legacy of nuclear testing in the Pacific. Most particularly by France in French Polynesia for three decades from 1966 to 1996 and nuclear legacy issues in other parts of the Pacific including from nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958, and of course Kiribati in 1957-58. The rationale of nuclear testing and Armageddon was driven by the global politics of mutually assured destruction of the cold war years.

This was a time of decolonisation in the Pacific where many of our island nations were embarking on journeys of self-determination and statehood. It is interesting looking back at the early days of the Forum where our leaders were establishing newly independent nations while also discussing regional cooperation through the lens of decolonisation, shipping, trade, fisheries, law of the sea, education, the environment, and nuclear issues.

When asked to deliver some remarks this afternoon on the Rarotonga Treaty, I went back through the Leaders' Forum Communiqués for context. So the following history lesson of the Treaty draws directly from the communiqué language relating to nuclear testing.

At the very first Forum gathering in 1971, "attention was drawn to the forthcoming series of nuclear tests to be conducted by France in the South Pacific. Leaders expressed their concern at the potential hazards that atmospheric tests pose to health and safety and to marine life which is a vital element in the Islands' subsistence and economy."

In 1973, "the Leaders reaffirmed their strong opposition to these tests which exposed their peoples as well as their environment to radioactive fallout against their wishes and without benefit to them, and which demonstrated deplorable indifference to their future wellbeing."

Throughout the rest of the 1970s and early 1980s, the message was constant and clear. In the 1979 Communiqué, the Leaders called out the United States for examining a proposal to store spent nuclear fuel in either Midway, Wake or Palmyra – atolls within the Pacific Ocean near to Hawaii. Forum Leaders "strongly condemned any move to use the Pacific as a dumping ground for nuclear wastes and urged the United States to store its nuclear wastes in the USA continent."

Finally in 1983, the Leaders reiterated their strong opposition to nuclear testing and proposals for storage and dumping of nuclear waste material in the Pacific. However, despite these unanimous expressions of view, "nuclear practices abhorrent to Forum countries continued." It was at this juncture, a nuclear free zone was first proposed.

In 1985, at the Forum Leaders Meeting in the Cook Islands, the "Forum observed that endorsement of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, which would establish only the second nuclear weapons free zone in a permanently inhabited area, reflected the deep concern of all Forum members at the continuing nuclear arms race and the risk of nuclear war."

The Treaty was signed by eight members on 6 August 1985, and entered into force on 11 December 1986 – they were Bob Hawke of Australia, Tom Davis of the Cook Islands, Ratu Kamisese Mara of Fiji, Ieremia Tabai of Kiribati, David Lange of New Zealand, Robert Rex of Niue, Tomasi Puapua of Tuvalu and Tofilau Eti Alesana of Samoa. Outstanding leaders of the Pacific.

The Forum Communiqué of 1986 stated that the "Forum agreed that the deeply-felt concerns and aspirations of all its members in regard to the acquisition, stationing, and testing of nuclear weapons and the dumping at sea of nuclear waste were addressed in the Treaty of Rarotonga."

Fast forward to 2023, the region continues to grapple with nuclear issues in the Pacific. As recently as 2022, Leaders invited non-Party Forum Members to accede to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, and urged the United States to ratify the Treaty Protocols.

The current Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown has proposed the Rarotonga Treaty as a Pacific Partnership for Prosperity for consideration by Leaders when they meet in November.

Re-energizing the Rarotonga Treaty is especially significant, given the timing and context of new challenges for our region. It represents a renewed commitment to advance the mechanisms of the Treaty to ensure its full operation, effect, and compliance.

The Rarotonga Treaty is 38 years old and we want to ensure that the Treaty remains relevant, fit for purpose and secures the nuclear-free status of our Blue Pacific for generations to come.

From the Cook Islands perspective, the Rarotonga Treaty remains a cornerstone of our approach to a nuclear free zone and the obligation under the treaty “to make every effort to achieve the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons, the terror which they hold for humankind and the threat which they pose to life on Earth.”

Leaders of the Pacific have left us a legacy in the Rarotonga Treaty, which has united the region in our response to nuclear testing. We have a responsibility to uphold the provisions of the Treaty, which can serve to inspire us as we navigate the challenges ahead and ensure a nuclear free legacy for generations to come.

In closing, I extend my deepest appreciation to each of you who have contributed to this momentous event. Your presence and participation have enriched our collective understanding and underscored the importance of commemorating International Day against Nuclear Testing. Let us move forward together, united in our commitment to a safer, nuclear free world.

Meitaki Maata, Vinaka Vakalevu and Thank you.