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Christopher

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JOURNAL

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Consumed by flames

Photo: Chevy Lin

What caused the fire? See page 3

Rebuilding Nitijela

Sorrow over loss of original documents

GIFF JOHNSON

The list of fire disasters to hit Majuro is long over decades — the Marshalls District HQ offices in Uliga during Trust Territory time, and Midtown Shop, Cost Price, and DAR store in more recent history.

But all these pale in comparison to the burning of the Nitijela earlier this week. The parliament building is the pinnacle of democratic rule in the RMI and far more than a symbol of democracy such as the flag or a government office.

"Nitijela is not merely a place and office space, it is where the seat of the democracy is situated," said former Speaker Kenneth Kedi in a social media post responding to the fire devastation of the Nitijela.

The outpouring of concern we at the Journal received from random members of the public about the loss of important original documents relevant to the founding of the Marshall Islands demonstrates how keenly people feel the loss of the Nitijela building in the aftermath

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GIFF JOHNSON

Tuesday morning, while the fire still burned at Nitijela, the RMI Cabinet held an emergency meeting at the MIMRA headquarters conference room to discuss its response.

By mid-afternoon, President Hilda Heine had issued a short statement posted to the President's Office Facebook page describing the situation and the government's next steps.

President Heine in her social media address told the nation that the foundation of democracy and culture will never falter. "As we see the ashes, it is a depressing sight to behold as Marshallese," said Heine. "The Nitijela is a symbol of democracy, a place where our leaders converge and determine the future of our islands."

The President vowed to start the work of a new parliament building before the end of this year and recognized the bravery of the first responders who fought the fire.

"The Nitijela will rise again," she said.

President promises fast track for new parliament

"Especially us the people of these islands."

From its Tuesday meeting, Cabinet put a priority on a new parliament building, which will see this project leapfrog ahead of the new capital building that is about to go into a design phase before construction starts.

Justice Minister Wisely Zackhras, sitting outside Nitijela Tuesday afternoon with first responders, also commented that Cabinet had endorsed a plan to fast-track work

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Hospital staffer puts out the call at 12am

WILMER JOEL

The nation's parliament building known as the Nitijela was struck by fire during the dead of night Monday-Tuesday.

Damieo Jitiam, who works at hospital as an ambulance driver, told the Journal that the origin of the fire began around 12am from a small building behind the Nitijela then spread to a container until it reached the parliament building. He mentioned that a colleague at the hospital made the distress call when the initial signs of fire appeared.

Jitiam added that the fire started as a flicker until it turned to blaze around 1am. "My heart breaks for our nation's parliament building," he said. "It is a sacred and hallowed ground for our people and leaders."

Firefighters from Amata Kabua International Airport were called to the scene and made several attempts to save the building. The MIPD fire truck has not worked for months so could not be deployed.

They managed to prevent the spread of the fire to other buildings, but fire destroyed the interior of most of Nitijela.

A government spokesperson told ABC Radio Australia Tuesday that the Police Department's fire truck was unable to respond due to "a critical equipment part being un-



The entrance to the Nitijela, the Marshall Islands Parliament. Photo: Chew Lin.

PII bringing in engineers

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to develop a new Nitijela building.

"PII has an emergency notice to proceed rebuilding immediately - we have engineers flying in this week and will divert material for other jobs," said Pacific International Inc. CEO Jerry Kramer Wednesday.

available for maintenance."

Another eyewitness mentioned that the responsiveness to the fire was inefficient.

Joe Lomae, the legislative counsel of the Parliament, told the Journal that the Nitijela's archive, containing historical docu-

ments including bills, legislations, and history of the constitutional convention dating back to the nation's founding, was completely destroyed by the fire.

Lomae added that around dawn he only retrieved an external hard drive and his computer. He said that ev-

For the meantime, the Nitijela is already setting up shop in the ICC large conference hall that has been used on multiple past occasions to host large meetings.

—With additional reporting by Wilmer Joel.

everything else in the building from the chamber, conference room, and offices were destroyed.

The fire occurred amid parliamentary sessions as government leaders are finalizing the budget for the upcoming fiscal year that starts October 1.



The hard drive and the computer of Nitijela Legislative Counsel Joe Lomae was saved from the inferno.

Lomae on digitization

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of the overnight fire Monday. The Nitijela archive that contained many original documents, including the history of the first Constitutional Convention and the early Nitijela bills from its 1979 establishment forward, were destroyed in the fire, according to Nitijela staff.

The library and archive was a large facility, developed over the past 32 year life of the Nitijela building — and particularly in more recent decades as Nitijela engaged in staffing and facilities upgrades. Many bills and resolutions that were adopted over the years are available on the Nitijela website, rmparliament.org.

Meanwhile, Nitijela staff told the Journal documents were digitized, but it wasn't immediately clear how complete the digitization was or where the digital records were located.

"The entire Marshall Islands Revised Code (laws) is saved including the previous digitized public laws are saved as well," said Nitijela Legislative Counsel Joe Lomae Wednesday. "These were all digitized in the past."

Lomae said he was able to get into his office to save records. "I managed to run into my office to get my external (hard drive) and the CPU," he said.

In addition to the loss of the thousands and thousands of documents in the archives, there were many original and irreplaceable pieces of artwork and photographs in the halls of and on display in parliament that were virtually all destroyed.

A look at the interior of the parliament tells the story: Virtually anything that wasn't destroyed by fire was rendered useless by water damage from the firefighters working to contain the blaze.

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Qingdao	(2 Aug)	(1 Sep)	(2 Oct)	(2 Nov)
Busan	6 - 8 Aug	5 - 8 Sep	6 - 7 Oct	6 - 7 Nov
Majuro	17 - 18 Aug	15 - 16 Sep	16 - 17 Oct	16 - 17 Nov
Tarawa	19 - 22 Aug	17 - 20 Sep	18 - 21 Oct	18 - 21 Nov

() is transshipment dates

Phil Welch
Oversea Representative Marshall Islands and Micronesia
Tel: 692-455-6724 | Mobile: 692-455-6724
Email: phil.welch@swireshipping.com
www.swireshipping.com

Radio Robinson Box 1 141

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Congresswoman Amata Coleman Radewagen, vice chairman of both the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific and the Natural Resources Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs, the two main congressional committees with legislative responsibility regarding the Republic of the Marshall Islands, expressed "shock and dismay" when told of the devastating fire at the Nitijela building in Majuro this week.

"I was in that building just last year," recalled Amata, "to attend the President's annual message opening the session of the sitting of the Nitijela," the Republic's national legislative body. "Although the Nitijela is currently in session, I thank God the fire was at night and no one was hurt. I have made calls and understand that the building was total loss and will have to be reconstructed from the ground up."

Amata said she intends to help in finding help for the res-