

Her Excellency President Hilda C. Heine
Inauguration Speech
January 22, 2024
Majuro, Marshall Islands



Speaker Wase, Vice Speaker Zackhras, Chairman and Iroj Lanny Kabua and members of the Council of Iroj. I wish to acknowledge the many distinguished guests who are with us this morning.

I stand before you today as a grandmother first, and a President second. I stand before you with humility, in the understanding that this role is one that is a high honor, one that is not bestowed on just anyone. It's a gift.

Jined Kiped is a proverb that gifts us with the perspective that mothers steer our families, and in turn our communities, to stay the course. So when I think of the leadership role I am stepping into, I draw from my years of professional experience as well as from my experiences as a mother and grandmother – a leader in my own family. So what does it mean to mother a nation? It means frustration, disappointment, loneliness, but most of all a profound love. A love that motivates us to expect better, to demand honesty, to dream brighter.

Our great nation is 45 years old, or 45 years young, as some would say. My generation is a unique one, in that we have witnessed the birth of this nation, and we have seen this island go through many transformations. Some for the better, some for the worse.

The year we signed the Compact, I was working at the College of Micronesia extension program here in Majuro. All the businesses were local. I used to order Mrs. Bing's ramen at Kitco restaurant on my lunch break. My daughter was born that year. Fashionable women wore skirts mailed from JC Penny's and men wore corduroy pants. Women's groups and activities were just starting then, which is where "Jined ilo Kobo" came to be, a platform and means for women to share their thoughts on politics. The nation was swept up in debates about whether RMI should be independent from Micronesia. I never even dreamed that I'd enter politics. I just focused on my job in education – I had finished college and only started working. The veneer of my youth was still shiny and new.

Now many years later, so much has changed. I entered politics because I wanted to be of service. RMI, although separate and independent from Micronesia, continues to nurture our closest relationships with our neighboring cousins in Micronesia, because we have deep history together – from experiencing the Trust Territory period, to experiencing the impacts of increasingly complicated geopolitics. The veneer of my youth has been replaced with the sharpened wisdom of age.

And this wisdom teaches me that there is still so much room for our nation to grow. To be better. To strive for more. To hold ourselves to a higher standard. We have to walk backwards into the future, facing our past. Reminding ourselves of the resilience that has always been a part of our lineage, our culture and identity. We gathered our resources and learned about our environments enough to survive.

Today, we must reach for more than just survival, move away from the concept of adequacy, or "ebwe." Look at where ebwe has gotten us. It's just not enough. We must reach for a community in which our most vulnerable members are supported, one where our services are

functional, where everyone's needs are met – a nation that is more than just building up the urban centers, and living to the standards of outsiders, but to live to our own standards. A nation that is also self-reliant. Resourceful.

How do we get our canoe to sail in that direction? I want to recognize and thank my Cabinet members and our public service because they will be the ones steering us in the right direction.

Mr. Speaker, when we gained our independence in 1979, our population was reported at 30,902. Today, our last census shows our population at 42,418. Twenty-five years after the Compact came into effect in 1986, it was reported that 22,343 of our citizens had migrated to the US. Today, that number has since risen to an estimated 30,000 or more. There are almost as many Marshallese living in the US as there are here in the RMI. This has serious implications. While this has not been seen or thought of as a serious national security issue - it is indeed one. Who are we as a nation without our people living in it? And what are the things we must do as an administration to fix the various factors that are driving people to leave? We know that the main reasons for migration are health, education, and employment opportunities. But we also know that we have serious problems that make life difficult here including infrastructure, energy, inequality, and accessible and reliable services.

Mr. Speaker, as you are aware, since day one, the national governments of the past have lived up to their obligations as mandated by the constitution. I thank the previous administration for continuing these efforts to address our ongoing problems and issues and recognize that much was addressed and resolved by the previous administration. This administration is dedicated to building on and continuing those efforts, as well as addressing key gaps and areas of concern.

Mr. Speaker, our immediate attention is needed for our infrastructure – first and foremost, our power supply. Our island has been suffering the worst power outages we've seen in decades over this past weekend and these past few weeks. We need to take steps necessary to understand where these problems with our power system originated, to ensure we never experience this level of inadequacy again. And I hope this assembly trusts that we will continue to work closely with the Marshalls Energy Company to address this issue over the coming weeks and months. This is also why we must diversify our energy sector and pivot our focus back to continuing the implementation of our National Energy Roadmap and investing in renewables.

Mr. Speaker, in the education sector, there remains more we can do to improve upon our education system and reduce the number of students dropping out of school and those who don't enroll in school. We should review and improve upon our curriculum, teacher qualifications and salaries, school supplies and materials. And we should review our scholarship program and its current priorities so that it is in line with the priorities of the government. There should be more funding dedicated to address issues of students with special

needs. More financial resources should be allocated to the private schools and institutions. And, we must establish a skill training program in partnership with the private sector. Upgrading the Youth Corps program to something that is comparable to the US Job Corps.

Mr. Speaker, we need to improve the quality and delivery of our health care system. There should be no excuse for lack of supplies, including basic everyday medications. Salaries must be increased for all doctors, nurses and medical technicians based on their qualifications. The construction of the new hospital must take place as soon as possible and without further delay. The establishment of a dialysis center must take place within this year. Too many of our people have had to move to the US for lack of such facilities here in Majuro and Ebeye.

Mr. Speaker, I call on all of us to wage war against NCDs, including diabetes. We should be more proactive in addressing and promoting a healthier diet. We must allocate more resources to fight this battle on all fronts. This means more efforts in educating the public on the curse of NCDs and to develop and promote a healthy diet for the public.

Mr. Speaker, the health of our citizens is more than just a medical center staffed with doctors and nurses. For Majuro, this means the current sewerage systems needs to be upgraded or even replaced if necessary. We need to improve on our housing program so that our people can afford to have decent homes that have running water and are connected to the sewerage system. Mr. Speaker, the fact that we have issues of poverty in the Marshall Islands is one that we cannot ignore. The root cause of poverty is inequality, lack of education and training, and job opportunities, which is why I will be proposing to raise the minimum wage again. Families will not be able to climb out of poverty if their wages do not increase with the increased cost of living. An educated, healthy citizenry as well as abundant job opportunities must be our ultimate goal in the next four years, if we want to ensure a nation that is resilient.

And a nation is not resilient if it does not support its women. It goes without saying that I have experienced first-hand how difficult it can be to be a woman in this society. Despite our nation being one of the few that has a woman as President, there remains much room for improvement for gender equality. Women comprises less leadership positions at the national and local levels, employment rates and salaries for women are lower than men, teenage pregnancies and family planning does not receive the support it requires, and domestic violence in homes and harassment in public places and workplaces continues to be a serious issue. If we truly believe as our ancestors have that “aelon kein an kora” then we need to listen to, believe, and continue to protect and preserve our women.

Mr. Speaker, it has been said that “The key to the economy of the Marshall Islands is out there in the water.” In the last 10 years, the Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority (MIMRA) has contributed over \$200 million dollars to the national government. This is significant in

terms of our sovereignty and ability to raise income from our sovereign resources such as tuna. The projections continue to be positive and we owe it to the collaborative efforts between the Forum Fisheries Agency, the Parties to the Nauru Agreement, and our Pacific brothers and sisters in managing the world's largest tuna fishery. We will see growth in the fisheries sector moving forward with emphasis on domestic development. We will continue to promote dockside offloading with our domestic and international fisheries partners to support economic growth in the RMI. At the same time, we will work with our domestic fisheries partners who are obligated to provide increased employment opportunities for our people as mandated under arrangements with MIMRA.

A historic development is our engagement with Walmart in the tuna supply chain. This arrangement is between RMI through MIMRA and the Nature Conservancy. I recognize and acknowledge with appreciation the previous government's leadership in developing this milestone.

Mr. Speaker, our government signed new Compact agreements with the government of the United States on October 16, 2023, to extend, renew and increase economic assistance to our nation. Sector assistance is scheduled to increase by almost 90% over recent expired levels and will be subject to 2% increases annually without any decrements for the next 20 years. This sector assistance will be supported by the creation of several additional funds addressing healthcare needs, climate change, implementation of the Kwajalein Atoll Master Plan, and additional support for education and environmental sectors.

The new Compact Agreements will replenish our Trust Fund, and this will be used to support all sectors including infrastructure as well as for priorities determined by our government. This will include the ability to provide Individual Support Distributions as payments to every Marshallese residing in our nation through the "Enra Bwe Jen Lale Rara" program as well as Extraordinary Needs Distributions for the otherwise unmet needs of listed atolls specifically including those with nuclear issues.

It's worthwhile to note that this Compact attempts to address the needs of the 4 atolls, as well as the trauma and impacts from the American nuclear weapons testing program. Although this new funding does not absolve that legacy of pain and suffering, it is a step in the right direction.

This support from the United States is indeed appreciated and welcome. However, it must also be stated that this was not nearly the amount that RMI deserves and requires to adequately address our needs.

Climate change in particular will be very costly for our nation's future to ensure the survival of our islands. To that end, RMI continues to punch above its weight at the international level,

advocating for our islands and holding the line against larger nations who continue to resist transitioning away from fossil fuels. At the national level, we are also preparing ourselves for these impacts, completing important policies such as the recently finalized National Adaptation Plan, or what we are calling our Survival plan, a plan that will require large scale adaptation and changes to our islands to ensure we stay above sea level.

Mr. Speaker, despite these very serious threats to our nation's future, I know that the new Compact Agreements can do much to help stem the outflow of migration; provide better education and health for our people, and increase opportunities for people to live and prosper here in our islands. After a long and often contentious negotiation, we are ready to move forward, consider, approve, and implement the new Compact agreements.

Mr. Speaker, the immediate issue, however, concerns the ability of our partner the United States to move forward and implement the agreements they have signed with us. Currently this process seems to be pending in the U.S. Congress. We can only hope that the U.S. will follow through on agreements it has signed with its closest of allies, especially in a time of increasing threats to our region. I want to urge President Biden and the US government to approve our new Compact Agreements as soon as possible. This is not a time for any further delay.

Mr. Speaker, our country is very young, relative to most of our neighbors in the Forum family. Within this short period of time, we have witnessed 10 different governments, 4 votes of no confidence, and have held two referendums on proposed amendments to our constitution. This is proof positive that our people have come to appreciate the true meaning of democracy and the rule of law as the bedrock of our constitutional government.

Mr. Speaker, we have been mandated by our Constitution and the Code of Ethics, to conduct the business of the government in a manner that will bring dignity, honor and respect to the offices we have been charged with by our citizens. Bribery and corruption is unacceptable at all levels. We must hold ourselves and each other accountable in order to operate ethically and effectively.

We have come a long way as a nation. And we still have so much further to go. I will do my best to steer our nation like a mother steers her family, as we navigate through these turbulent seas. I know and believe that a better future is possible if we put our hopes into action. Thank you and God bless the Republic of the Marshall Islands.