



PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM

OP-ED: Japan must work with the Pacific to find a solution to the Fukushima water release issue – otherwise we face disaster



Opinion Piece by Henry Puna, Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum

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Over the past 20 months, Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) members have been in dialogue with the government of Japan on its proposed plans to release over a million tonnes of contaminated nuclear wastewater into the Pacific Ocean as announced in April 2021.

I was heartened by the very strong position taken by PIF Members from the outset, that Japan should hold off on any such release until we are certain about the implications of this proposal on the environment and on human health, especially recognising that the majority of our Pacific peoples are coastal peoples, and that the ocean continues to be an integral part of their subsistence living.

We have taken significant steps to work with Japan to understand their position and the rationale underpinning its unilateral decision. As a region, we committed to working with them at the technical level and engaged an independent panel of five scientific experts in key fields such as nuclear power and radiation, high energy physics, marine chemistry, biochemistry, marine biology, and oceanography to provide an independent scientific assessment of the impacts of such a release.

But the discussions this past year have not been encouraging. We have uncovered serious information gaps and grave concerns with the proposed ocean release. Simply put, more data is needed before any ocean release should be permitted. Despite this, Japan is continuing with plans for discharge in the spring of 2023, relying on the next four decades of discharge to figure it out.

Based on our experience with nuclear contamination, continuing with ocean discharge plans at this time is simply inconceivable and we do not have the luxury of time to sit around for four decades in order to “figure it out”.

It is imperative that we work together to ensure a common understanding of the full implications of this activity now, as I fear that, if left unchecked, the region will once again be headed towards a major nuclear contamination disaster at the hands of others. For the sake of present and future generations, now is the time to act to fully understand the impacts of such discharge on the environment and on human health before any decision is made. We owe it to our children and grandchildren to work towards ensuring that their futures are secured and safe. This is our moral and legal obligation.

Together, we must uphold the commitments that we have made through our Treaty of Rarotonga. We are legally bound to keep the region free of environmental pollution by radioactive and nuclear waste and other radioactive matter, and to uphold legal obligations to prevent ocean dumping and any action to assist or encourage dumping by other states.

I am reminded that this conversation is not a new one. Four decades ago, Forum leaders also urged Japan and other shipping states “to store or dump their nuclear waste in their home countries rather than storing or dumping them in the Pacific”. A mere four years after that political statement, in 1985, the Forum welcomed the Japan Prime Minister’s statement that “Japan had no intention of dumping radioactive waste in the Pacific Ocean in disregard of the concern expressed by the communities of the region”.

The decision for any ocean release is not and should not only be a domestic matter for Japan, but a global and transnational issue that should give rise to the need to examine the issue in the context of obligations under international law. Choosing and adopting the appropriate path in terms of international governance is key, and we must pursue every possible avenue including mechanisms available under international law.

We must take the time to closely examine whether current international safety standards are adequate to handle the unprecedented case of the Fukushima Daiichi.

Indeed, the unprecedented nature of this case is of major concern. How we handle this, as a global community, will set a precedent for future actions and responses. , This is particularly important given the climate crisis and growing intensity and scale of natural disasters, which pose significant challenges to the safety of nuclear power plants and infrastructure throughout the world.

Alternative options include safe storage and radioactive decay, bioremediation, and use of treated water to make concrete for special applications.

Before us is a golden opportunity to be proactive and to get it right without waiting for four decades of dumping to unfold. It would be unconscionable for us as a region to once again allow ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of security.

I am not asking that we discontinue the plans to discharge. I am asking that we take the time and work together to ensure scientific rigour in order to receive the assurance of safety needed for people's health and for sound stewardship of the ocean. I am asking today, what our Pacific people did not have the opportunity to ask decades ago when our region and our ocean was identified as a nuclear test field. I am asking that we take the time to fully consider the implications of these actions on our region before choosing the course of action that is best for all.

Do not disregard us. Work with us. Our collective future and that of our future generations depends on it.

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