

TRIBUTE

Celebrating the Life of Gabriela Ngirmang of Palau (Belau)

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Gabriela Ngirmang, Mirair of Palau, who was instrumental in giving the world its first nuclear free constitution, passed away peacefully in the early morning of October 10, 2007 at 12:10 am (Palau time). Gabriela had been sick for some time.

Palau is a small nation south west of Guam in the northern Pacific. As matrilineal Palau's Mirair (the leading woman for the eastern side of the State of Koror), Gabriela Ngirmang was the leader of *Otil A Beluad* (the Anchor of the Land), a women's organization for the past 50 years. Eighty-four years old in 2007, she had been a central figure among the women elders of her nation and an inspirational leader for social justice and anti-nuclear activists across the Pacific and globally.

Gabriela believed it was her responsibility to protect and advance the well-being of her people. She had experienced and survived the Second World War, and because of this experience, she did not want Palauans to experience war again. Aware of the devastation caused to the neighboring Marshallese from the U.S. nuclear test regime, she knew the dangers of all things nuclear. Her concern motivated her to lead her Palauan people to write a nuclear free clause into their peoples' constitution as they moved to reclaim their nation's independence from the United States.

In 1979, 92 percent of Palauan people voted for their nuclear free constitution which included a clause requiring 75 percent of the voters to agree before nuclear weapons could be brought into Palau. This was the first time a clause banning and/or restricting nuclear activities had been included in any nation's constitution anywhere in the world. This achievement has not been repeated since.

Unfortunately, the U.S. had different intentions for Palau. The Pentagon wanted one-third of Palau's precious land and its deep water harbor (one of the most beautiful in the world) for military purposes, including for the storage of nuclear weapons. In the fifteen years between 1979 and 1994, when the Republic of Palau was finally announced, Palauans were forced to vote eleven times to uphold their unique constitutional clause.

Each time a new plebiscite was announced, courageous women would travel between villages and islands to talk with communities to provide them with information so that they could make informed decisions about the Compact of Free Association and the changes the U.S. wanted made to their constitution. Women had played a major role in the constitution's development, and now they were struggling to ensure their people knew what was at stake if they rejected the protection of its nuclear free clause. It was grassroots networking at its best (and hardest): women talked to women as they worked in their taro patches (gardens).

Standing up against immense pressure by the U.S. government as well as increasing intimidation and corruption within Palau, Gabriela faced threats to her life and violence against herself and her family.

The U.S. spent millions of dollars campaigning for its preferred version of the Compact of Free Association which, once implemented, would grant it military rights to Palauan lands and waters. Both legal and illegal pressure was brought to bear on the Palauan community. This included the assassination of Palau's president (the first assassination of a president in the Pacific), murder and physical violence towards

pro-constitutional Palauans, and the building of an unnecessarily massive power station by a British company which bankrupted the nation, pressuring many Palauans to acquiesce to the U.S. demands.

Tension and division within the community came to a head in August-September 1987, when the women elders, led by Gabriela, took their own government to court for attempting to force a vote on the constitution which would require a simple majority to pass, rather than the 75 percent protective clause written into the constitution.

Calling on the powers that have traditionally rested with women, 50 women elders from all over the archipelago filed the law suit. The Palauan government responded with economic coercion, including turning off the lights and water, and laying off government workers. An unprecedented reign of terror was unleashed against the plaintiffs and their families. Some of the laid-off workers went to the homes of the plaintiffs and threatened to kill them if they did not withdraw their lawsuit. Most of these men were drunk. Shots were fired at some of the plaintiffs' houses, and Gabriela's house was fire-bombed. The terror culminated in the assassination of Rubak (male elder) Bedor Bins, by mistake—the killers were targeting his son, Roman Bedor, a prominent lawyer for the pro-constitution lobby. Nothing like this had ever happened in Palau before.

The police went to the elders' houses and made them sign to withdraw their lawsuit. Two women elders then went to the courthouse and withdrew their case. Noting the violence and threats against the women elders (the courthouse was surrounded by men dressed in camouflage gear bearing guns), the presiding judge said that the case was withdrawn under duress and invited the elders to resubmit the same case when it was safe for them to do so.

Gabriela urged others to join her in filing another lawsuit against the Palauan government. In 1988 she travelled to the U.S. Congress and the United Nations to inform them that the case was to be refiled and asked them to give the Palauans time as they were working under a very dangerous situation. The case was taken back to court in 1989, and the Compact was declared null and void. U.S. maneuverings continued, and eventually the Palauan government unilaterally amended the constitutional clause from 75 to 50 percent so that the Compact could be passed with a simple majority.

The women elders filed more lawsuits in 1994 but could find no one in Palau to represent them, because it was too dangerous. With few options, they finally hired a lawyer from the U.S. and took their case to Hawaii (away from the imminent danger of Palau), but they were forced to withdraw their case, because they perceived that the lawyer was not working in their interests. The Compact went through, and in October 1994, Palau was declared independent.

Today the U.S. retains control over Palau's military and foreign affairs and can take any land it wants with 60 days notice. The U.S. has not yet activated this right and will face another backlash of Palauan resistance should it attempt to do so. The Compact lasts for 50 years (2044), though the financial gains the Palauans secured for their agreement cease in 2010.

The Palauan struggle to protect their nuclear free clause was a real-life case of David and Goliath as one of the world's smallest nations stood against the world's biggest and most powerful. It inspired movements in the Solomons, Fiji and Aotearoa/New Zealand, which successfully banned nuclear warships from their entering their harbors.

Gabriela was at the center of this growing resistance to the militarization of the seas and the planned use of nuclear weapons. Embodying the values of peace and non-violence, she questioned the colonial, military and nuclear implications of the U.S. policy and its impact on Palauans.

Gabriela's commitment to peace has influenced and encouraged people around the world. Her gift to humanity has been her consistent determination to fight for the rights of her people to be free, to be safe. She is an inspiration for us all wishing to live in a world free from the threat of nuclear war. She proved that small people can stand against giants.

Gabriela was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 by the Switzerland-led global "1000 Women for Peace" campaign to draw attention to women peacemakers worldwide. In 1988 the Palauan women's organization, *Otil A Beluad*, was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Gabriela's contribution to world peace will be remembered. Her desire for her people and for all people to be nuclear free will not pass with her. Her work continues to live on in others. As her daughter, Cita Morei, once said,

The fight against the Compact has been a painful struggle, but the good news is that it did not kill the women's spirit, our spirit, the spirit that resists the evilness of war, of nuclear weapons. The mustard seed for world peace that was planted in Belau's nuclear free constitution did not die.

It was Gabriela who planted that mustard seed. It is left to the rest of us to nurture it, in her memory.