



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

High Chief Ibedul Gibbons and the people of Belau (Palau)

(1983)



for upholding the democratic, constitutional right of their island to remain nuclear-free.

Ibedul Gibbons

High Chief Ibedul Gibbons received the Right Livelihood Award in 1983 on behalf of the people of Palau for the courageous defence of Palau's constitution against the political machinations of those supporting the islands' Compact with the United States.

Palau, also called Belau, is a Micronesian archipelago in the Western Pacific with a population of 15,000 people. After World War II, it became a US Trust Territory, by which the US was mandated to provide for the development of the political, social and economic well-being of Palau, leading to its independence.

In 1979 the people of Palau voted overwhelmingly for a constitution which prohibited the use, testing, storage or disposal of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and the entry of both nuclear-power and nuclear-armed ships and aircraft. Since then the country has been in continuing crisis. Two presidents have been shot dead, political activity has been characterised increasingly by violence, intimidation and corruption, and the Palauan and US governments have been accused of tampering with the democratic process.

At the centre of the crisis is the Compact of Free Association between the United States and Palau. This gives Palau internal self-government, a 50-year aid package and certain defence guarantees. In return, Palau foregoes some foreign policy autonomy and allows the US certain military rights. These rights are incompatible with the anti-nuclear clause in the constitution and the US refused to agree the Compact while this clause was in force.

Before its adoption, the 1980s saw unremitting pressure from Compact Supporters, many of whom stood to gain personally from it. Ten referenda were held on either the Compact or the Constitution. None yielded the 75% majority required to change the constitution, but Palauan courts found that they gave rise to threats, bribery, intimidation and violence.

Under the US pressure, the Palau Supreme Court ruled that the three-quarters majority needed to

amend the Constitution could be replaced by a simple majority (51%). This was done in yet another referendum and the Compact was finally approved in October 1994.

This struggle split Palau's small and closely-knit society to such an extent that the Ibedul (High Chief) faced a difficult personal conflict between his traditional consensus role and his opposition to the Compact. The brunt of the struggle for a nuclear-free Palau was carried by the Belau Pacific Center and the Coalition of Women's Organisations, Otil a Belaud. Under heavy pressure, they abandoned their court case just before the 1994 Compact implementation deadline. However, a resumption of their campaign is planned if and when the US decides to implement the nuclear 'rights' conferred on it by the Compact.

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