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Climate Change Is Killing Her Country. Who Will Decide if It Lives?

By David Marchese Photograph by Mamadi Doumbouya

“We’re on the *front* of the front lines of vulnerability,” says Tina Stege. She would know: Stege is the climate envoy for the Marshall Islands, a country of roughly 60,000 people spread mostly among coral atolls halfway between Hawaii and Australia that is facing an imminent existential threat from climate change. In the Marshalls, sea-level rise has already led to increased flooding and the degradation of water used for drinking and cooking. Ongoing coral bleaching affects local fish stocks, which Marshallese rely upon for food as well as for income from nations that apply to fish in the country’s waters. And a warmer, wetter world means a greater risk of waterborne disease — the country was hit hard by an outbreak of Dengue fever in 2019. The horizon is dark and will only get

darker if the rest of the world doesn't make the changes necessary to stay below 1.5 Celsius degrees of warming above preindustrial levels (which appears highly unlikely). While her country's situation may seem uniquely dire, Stege knows that the Marshalls, site of horrific damage caused by U.S. nuclear weapons testing in the 1940s and 1950s, offers both a window into a possible future of even more widespread uninhabitability as well as a shared opportunity. "Climate change is a preventable crisis," says Stege, who is 45. "There are pathways. But can we achieve what needs to be achieved?"

I have two questions to start, about power and morality: Your country's continued existence is dependent on the decisions of far more powerful, far less at-risk countries. So how has your advocacy work affected your thinking about global power? And second: I've seen people argue that global warming is likely to wind up at something like 2.2 or 2.7 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, and therefore we shouldn't freak out because at those levels life for us in rich Western countries won't be all that different. How do you view that argument from a moral perspective?

The way I was raised in my community was with this idea that when you protect those who are the most vulnerable in your community, you are protecting your entire community. This translates to the message we've had for the world on why they should care about the Marshall Islands: Climate change is going to affect everyone on this planet. I think in 2020, 30 million people were displaced by climate change¹. When you have millions of people who are forced to flee, they're going to be spilling over into wealthier nations. Those nations are going to have to respond. Do they build walls or do they welcome? I have real concerns, because we've seen that you're more open to welcoming those who maybe look like you or who you understand, and you're more likely to build walls for those who seem different. That's where, in terms of power differentials, what we do as the Marshall Islands is tell stories — show how human dignity is a common value that applies whether you are from the Marshall Islands or the United States or Europe or Sudan. When you diminish the human dignity of another individual or community or country, that diminishes your human dignity. So telling the stories, bearing witness, establishing the things that bind us together is critical to addressing climate change.

You're talking about interconnectedness. Along those lines, how might what's happening in Ukraine affect the Marshall Islands? You can't help but feel connected when you see the terrifying images and hear how people are being killed or forced to flee their homes. We were talking about power: the idea of sovereignty, territorial integrity, the right to choose your own future. Those are core to the concerns that I have for the future of my own country with regard to climate change, and seeing it play out in real time in Ukraine, where international norms and the rule of law have been broken — all small countries everywhere are left to worry. We're on a war footing with climate change in my country. That question of "How do you feel when your country may be at war with climate change but wealthier countries, they're going to be OK?" The thing is, they're not. Maybe there's degrees of OK, but just as war in Ukraine is having effects on Europe with all the countries who are welcoming the refugees, it's also the ripple effects of the energy crisis and people who go to pay their gas

bill — it affects them directly. I just finished reading about taxi drivers in the Marshall Islands who met last week to talk about how they had to raise prices because unless they do they won't be able to buy a bag of rice for their family. So yes, we will be hit first and hardest by climate change, but everyone's going to be hit.



Tina Stege (center) in Namdrik atoll in 2016, working on a project for the American Museum of Natural History. From Tina Stege

The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change seemed to me to suggest that climate-change mitigation and adaptation need to be the global focus, more than trying to stay under 1.5 degrees of warming.² But what would adaptation look like for the Marshall Islands? In the Marshalls, we're two meters above sea level. It's a small, low-lying atoll nation. I don't know if you've ever been to an atoll. We're essentially one long beach. It's all coast. There's no interior. So adaptation for us is many things. It needs to be about responding to sea-level rise, that's first and foremost. But it's also about water resources, because our aquifers are going to be inundated. Freshwater lenses³ will be affected. We're going to get more droughts. It's less rain. It's going to be coral bleaching. We are coral atolls, and corals are dying. How do we live on an island where all the fish that we eat live off those corals? It's water scarcity, it's food scarcity, it's health impacts related to those things. In the longer term, you're looking at engineering solutions. Protecting the coastlines: People often refer to sea walls, but sea walls can bring problems like erosion. So how do you do that in a way that doesn't negatively impact your environment too much? It's raising buildings. It's looking at where people might need to move within the country to consolidate populations on the higher ground that does exist. It's terribly complicated. We're looking in the tens of billions of dollars, we've been told, to safeguard the entire country, and just plain billions⁴ to safeguard parts of the country. That's safeguarding in terms of the hard engineering solutions, but that doesn't get at all of the issues that you can't quantify, like cultural heritage: people moving away

from homes that have been theirs for generations, and how that affects your resilience, your ability to sustain yourself. So the numbers are staggering, but the other issues are even harder to fathom.

Rapid worldwide decarbonization isn't likely, for a variety of reasons. But is there a quickly achievable step that more countries could be taking that they're not? The G20 countries produce 80 percent of total emissions. Decarbonization within those countries is where the focus needs to be. The switch to renewable energies can be done at speed and scale with the proper resourcing. The technology is already there. There just needs to be a much more focused and intentional push across the G20 economies. Maybe we'll see some of that happen as a result of events in Europe. You're already hearing from European leaders that they're looking to decarbonize much more swiftly in response to the crisis in Ukraine. But we should see that same level of crisis response to decarbonization across all of the major emitters. It can be done. There needs to be that same sense that it is a true emergency.



Stege at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in November. Yves Herman/Reuters

What's the Marshallese sense of the future? I work with a lot of people who've spent years thinking about how to ensure that we stay in the Marshall Islands and maintain our culture, our identity, our sense of place and who we are as people. I'm not going to say there aren't times when you get overwhelmed, but there's never a question of whether or not you're going to keep fighting for that future. Maintaining your homeland and making sure that you have a future for your kids is the ultimate motivation. Also, it takes a lot to live on these islands. They're not lush. Our sandy soil doesn't support a mango tree. It supports the breadfruit tree, the pandanus tree and the banana tree. And you have fish. It's a beautiful environment, but it's a pretty unforgiving one. So Marshallese have resilience built into our DNA. We've also been through equally challenging times. The day we're talking on is Nuclear Remembrance Day

in the Marshall Islands. It's the day that the Bravo hydrogen bomb was detonated in Bikini.⁵ Nuclear ash fell across the Marshalls, and many people were affected. We still have people struggling with cancers and health systems that haven't been able to respond adequately. But in the face of those challenges, we've had people continue advocating on the world stage for nuclear justice, just like we advocate for climate justice. So when you have those examples, you soldier on because you know so many people have done it before you. The only way is to keep fighting.

Do you see parallels between the damage inflicted on the Marshall Islands by nuclear testing and the climate-change damage happening now? Very important parallels and also very important differences. In terms of parallels: the fact of a crisis that essentially is a wave coming in from the outside, over which you did nothing to contribute and over which you have little control or sense of how it started. Nuclear testing resulted in displacement of populations;⁶ there are people who still live with health impacts.⁷ The sense of violence doesn't unfold with one event but continues to unfold. Those are some of the parallels. One very important difference: A big part of the nuclear legacy was the lack of information — the amount of secrecy and classified documents and people feeling as if they were guinea pigs. Marshallese have worked hard to have that *not* be our story with climate change. We are at the front of the fight. We're basing the fight on the science. We're telling our stories to the world based on our firsthand experiences. That has been a big part of what's different this time: We are empowering ourselves to be able to respond and make our own choices.

What are those choices? And which of them do you think are actually available? We want to be able to make choices about how we adapt. Whether that is protect, relocate, raise land. At the moment I don't see a path forward on accounting for the cost of those choices. We absolutely will need international financial support to be able to make those choices. Right now it's in dribs and drabs. We need it to be at scale and speed.

There are beautiful folk stories from the Marshall Islands about the importance of ocean navigation and finding one's way. Reading those made me wonder if there are specific things from Marshallese culture or history that you're drawing on for support these days. Well, yes. There's

this phrase, and it's personal because it was one that my cousin, Darlene Keju-Johnson,⁸ adopted in her work. That phrase is *tuwaak bwe elimaaajnono*, and it refers to situations where you need to get to another island, but there are waves — they seem impossible. *Tuwaak bwe elimaaajnono* means face your challenge, go into the wave to get to the other island. That is a testament to resiliency. If your island is a place that you can't survive on, you need to get in your canoe and go to the next island to find sustenance.

That idea of the wave coming and you have to face it and get to another island — are you thinking about a world in which the Marshallese ancestral home is gone? Where home has to be somewhere else? The future I want is a future where we get to choose. Maybe that means migration, but I don't want to be forced. I don't want to be a refugee. When you become a refugee, you have so much stripped from you. The main thing that's stripped from you is choice. Choice is at the heart of what it means to have that sense of dignity, of empowerment, of crafting your own way forward. Self-determination is at the heart of our adaptation plan. There are going to be tough choices. We accept that. What we don't accept is that we don't have a choice. The *world* should not accept that. Taking away choices doesn't just diminish us, it diminishes the world.

This interview has been edited and condensed from two conversations.

David Marchese is a staff writer for the magazine and the columnist for Talk. Recently he interviewed Brian Cox about the filthy rich, Dr. Becky about the ultimate goal of parenting and Tiffany Haddish about God's sense of humor.