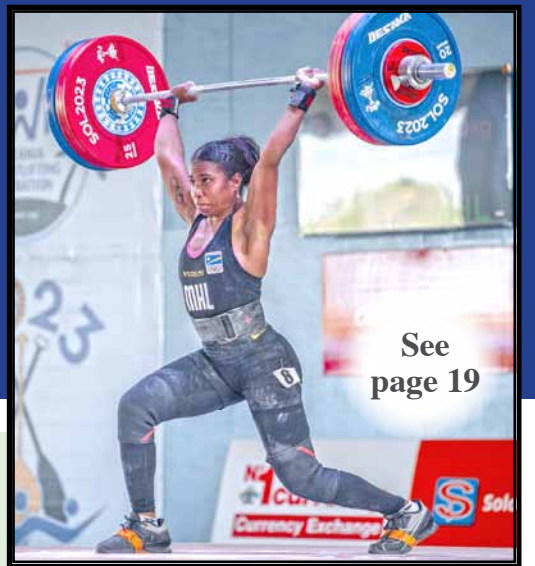




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## Mattie's going to Paris Games

# Safety nets to protect people

No bank account, no pay from the RMI

**GIFF JOHNSON**

President Hilda Heine remains focused on social protection programs for the Marshall Islands population. Continuing the theme that guided her first term in office, the President and her new government is focused on a series of initiatives to fill gaps that currently leave segments of the population in difficult circumstances.

"We are getting the World Bank to look at our social protection system to see if there are any holes," President Heine said in an interview with the Journal last week.

In the meantime, President Heine highlighted some of the social protection initiatives that are moving ahead:

- The non-contributor social protection bill that was passed last year is in progress of implementation with the aim to roll it out October 1. This new system, which will be administered by MISSA, will provide a monthly stipend to retirement age Marshallese and people of any age who are disabled, even though they have never contributed taxes to the retirement system. The government needs to set aside funding to support this program for the upcoming fiscal year. "The process (for establishing the new system) could delay implantation but we are ensuring that it moves forward," she said.

Heine made the point that many people who are disabled "have nothing to support themselves with. We want to make sure we are leaving no one behind."

- The Early Childhood Development pro-

Continued page 2



With the Micronesian Games looming in just nine weeks, practice session by local teams are picking up intensity. Here, the women's basketball team, under the guidance of Coach Mouj Lewi, works out at the new-look ECC gym.

See RMI wrestlers story, photos on p21.

Photo: Giff Johnson.

**GIFF JOHNSON**

The Ministry of Finance is ending its system of printing paychecks for RMI government employees.

A majority of workers have now migrated to the direct deposit system and the rest are being given an ultimatum by Finance Minister David Paul: Provide your bank account to Finance or you won't get paid next week Friday.

"Sixty-one percent have complied with the digital payment system," said Paul. "The Secretary (Patrick Langrine) will issue a memo this week that states by next pay period, everyone has to put in their account information or not be paid because there will be no physical checks printed."

The point is to "eliminate paper," he said. The new Finance payroll system deposits employees' pay directly in their bank accounts and their allotment payments directly to the banks or businesses to which they owe.

This is one step in the Ministry of Finance's effort to automate its tax system to create a paperless environment where tax payers can pay online, Paul told the Marshall Islands Chamber of Commerce meeting last week.

The goal of the new Finance Information Management System is to streamline processing so that purchase requisitions can be processed into purchase orders in a single day, he said. "We're not going to print checks," he said. "Payments will be deposited directly to bank accounts."

Finance wakeup call: P2

## Members applaud passage of resolution

The Marshall Islands Nitijela, within minutes of returned to session Wednesday morning, passed Resolution 11 to approve the new Compact of Free Association negotiated with the United States.

The move to adopt the Compact resolution followed two weeks of public hearings in Majuro and

Kwajalein by Nitijela committees.

Nitijela members broke into applause following passage of Resolution 11, which endorses the new Compact. Nitijela Speaker Brenson Wase congratulated the RMI people and presidents David Kabua and Hilda Heine and their administrations for getting the Compact

agreement to the approval stage.

The RMI is the last of the three freely associated states to formally endorse the Compact. Palau and the FSM both passed legislation and signed diplomatic notes with the US confirming adoption of the Compact last month. The 10-page resolution specifically approves the

agreement for amended Compact 2023, the agreement for procedures to implement US funding, the agreement for the Compact Trust Fund, and the Federal Programs and Services agreement. The latter is not yet signed, so the resolution mentions that it is approved "when concluded and signed."



Fisheries officials from the RMI and seven Pacific Island countries joined together in Majuro this week for a port management risk assessment training program.

# MIMRA hosts port training

The Marshall Island Marine Resources Authority is hosting the Regional Port Statement Management Risk Assessment Training this week at the Marshall Islands Resort.

The training is being run in partnership with the Forum Fisheries Agency.

A total of 20 participants from eight FFA Members — Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Island, Nauru, PNG, Solomon Island, Tonga and Vanuatu — are participating in the training.

The training aims to establish a common understanding of the key elements of Port State Management Risk Assessment and Analysis, analyze the level of risk associated with vessels, and inform members on the regional risk assessment criteria incorporated into the regional e-PSM system.

During the training, participants will be able to understand the different roles of the various players involved in conducting PSM activities in ports using Risk Assessment Criteria. They will also discuss the types of information that inform risk assessment in the region and the available tools that can provide this information to support risk assessment.

The training program will consist of presentations, practical exercises with participants boarding vessels for inspections, and group discussions.

Participants will have the chance to learn from MIMRA Operations how to conduct risk assessments and visit the MIMRA Surveillance Center. There will also be a practical exercise onboard a fishing vessel to observe the methodology used in conducting risk assessment and use of remote reading electronic hook scales for transshipment monitoring developed by MIMRA Port State Measures team.

# Ransomware warning for RMI

“MOF attacked by ransomware” blared the headline last week in Tia Belau, Palau’s longest publishing newspaper. The story explained that the Ministry of Finance had been shut down by cyber criminals who demanded payment in order to unlock the ministry’s computers.

“This is a wakeup call for us,” RMI Finance Minister David Paul told the Journal Tuesday. “We don’t want to be a victim. We have to be proactive to prevent it.”

He said the ministry is only as strong as its weakest link. And the weakest link “are our users,” he said.

The ministry, with support of the

Chief Secretary’s office and the Digital RMI program, is launching an awareness training program for Finance staff in hopes of getting them to understand the potential dangers of phishing emails and clicking on random links.

“Opening documents that they are not supposed to will contaminate the entire (Finance) system,” said Paul of the potential threat of Finance’s system being online.

He said the ransomware attack in Palau is a learning situation for the RMI. “Don’t wait until it happens,” is his message to ministry staff. Like Palau’s financial management

system, “everything is cloud-based (at the Ministry of Finance),” said Paul. “It is susceptible (to cyber attacks).”

The minister said that the awareness training program is being rolled out for all users. In addition, the RMI government will be moving to a centralized email system for government workers in an effort to improve security.

Meanwhile, in the wake of the ransomware attack, the Ministry of Finance in Palau last week began the challenging process of restoring its files from the “cloud,” where all of its data is located.

# Hilda worried about kids not in school

From page 1  
gram, that Heine engaged the World Bank to support during her first term, will continue. But, she added, “we need reassess it at some point” to ensure implementation is meeting the expectations established for the program.

The universal basic income program, that the government also hopes to roll out by October 1, the start of the new fiscal year. “We can only do so much with wages,” Heine said, in reference to the announced govern-

ment plan to incrementally raise the minimum wage. “It’s still not enough and when we increase the minimum wage there are other consequences. In the meantime, people are suffering.”

The universal basic income program, which the government plans to fund using Compact trust fund money, “will go a long way to shoring up families,” the President said. “It will bump up their standard of living by helping with everyday needs.” She said this will really help citizens here in

RMI. The universal basic income program is targeted to citizens residing in RMI and legislation will be introduced to move the plan ahead.

While some political leaders want it to include Marshallese in the US, the president made the point that “the new Compact provides assistance” for Marshallese living in the US.

In a new development, the President said the country “needs to look at how well we are taking care of our children.” The ECD

program is for children under five years of age. “We don’t have a good sense of how we’re doing in the five-to-18 age group,” she said, adding that she wants to evaluate the situation of young people in this age group “to get a better understanding to target assistance.”

What worries Heine? “What I see is kids not in school,” she said. “It worries me, not being in school. It’s an area that needs attention.”

All of these initiatives are feed-

ing into the Heine administration’s developing Agenda 2030. The consultation held with RMI ministries and agencies late last month fed information to the President and Cabinet that is being used to develop the plan of action that is in the process of being drafted.

Heine said the new Agenda 2030 will be introduced to Nitijela in the August for endorsement. “It’s a good opportunity to take a look at where we’re at and where we want to be by 2030,” she said.



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Qingdao	(28 Mar)	17 - 18 Apr	(26 Apr)	(20 May)
Busan	1 - 3 Apr	20 - 22 Apr	30 - 2 May	22 - 23 May
Yokohama	5 - 6 Apr	No Call	4 - 5 May	18 - 21 May
Majuro	13-Apr	30-Apr	12-May	1-Jun
Tarawa	14 - 17 Apr	No Call	13 - 16 May	No Call
Suva	25 - 27 Apr	12 - 13 May	26 - 28 May	13 - 14 Jun
Pago	2 - 3 May	18 - 19 May	1 - 3 Jun	19 - 20 Jun

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# Supplemental \$\$ from Compact

A second supplemental budget bill is expected to be introduced to Nitijela this week by the Minister of Finance David Paul. He already introduced a \$9 million supplemental appropriation bill that was adopted a month ago.

The unusual second supplemental appropriation bill is to encompass the anticipated funding from newly approved Compact of Free Association.

The RMI Constitution requires that all government funding be appropriated by Nitijela approved law.

The new Compact will involve over \$20 million in government funding and \$400 million trust fund contributions, which will be reflected in the new supplemental budget, said Minister Paul.

“We need to appropriate the new money,” he said.

# Taiwan pays for RMI uniforms

## Local team to design and print outfits

**HILARY HOSIA**

It's official: uniforms for RMI participants in the Micronesian Games are being sponsored by the Taiwan Embassy and the Taiwanese Association.

A check in the amount of \$57,625 was received by Minister of Natural Resources and Commerce and President of the Marshall Islands National Olympic Committee Tony Muller from Taiwan Ambassador Jeffrey Hsia following a ceremonial handover Wednesday at the NRC headquarters in Delap.

Uniforms will be given to RMI athletes, officials and VIPs.

Self-taught designer and owner of RiMajol Creationz Allen Mwekto and local entrepreneur Candice Guavis from ELEFA won the bid to design and print the uniforms. According to Minister Tony, "keep it local," in regards to vendors for the upcoming games in June. What's unique about the donation is the fact that last week, the Chinese Fujian Association and Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Majuro offered to sponsor the uniforms. That development was sidelined by the Taiwan Embassy and Association after learning rumors that the Chinese were stepping in, with the requirement that Chinese logos be printed on the uniforms.

It offered Marshallese a real-time close-up view of the ongoing geopolitical competition for influence that is playing out in the Pacific Islands region.

The Micro Games are neutral, Minister Tony said, while showing appreciation for the support from both the Chinese and Taiwanese circles.



**Majuro Mayor and strong supporter of Taiwan Ladie Jack joined Ambassador Steve Hsia and Minister and NOC President Tony Muller at the handover Wednesday. In addition, Taiwan Association President Yu-Hao Wang, Head of Micro Games Media and Entertainment Mack Capelle, RiMajol Creationz Allen Mwekto and Taiwan Embassy staff Josh Lin joined in. Photo: Ministry of Natural Resources and Commerce.**

## Bill would remove sin tax from CMI coffers

A bill was introduced to Nitijela Wednesday to transfer revenues generated from the Nitijela's so-called "sin tax" — tax revenue from the sale of alcohol and tobacco — from the College of Marshall Islands to the Ministry of Education, Sport and Training and Ministry of Health and Human Services.

Jabat Parliament Member Kessai Note said the original intention of supplementing the college was to show the US Western Association of Schools and Colleges accrediting commission that the government supported the college.

Mejit Nitijela Member Dennis Momotaro said he supports the removal from

CMI, adding the removal was a form of disciplinary action taken by the government in light of CMI's inability to complete audits and perform required accountability work. Education Minister Joe Bejang said the college will continue to receive portions of the tax since the college falls under his umbrella.

## Power outage after blissful two weeks

After nearly two weeks without a power outage, unexpected power outages his Majuro Tuesday and Wednesday this week. Tuesday's unplanned outage shut down power for the whole

island for a few hours during the day, but power was restored by the early evening. Wednesday morning, power went off for Ajeltake to Laura just before 6am and remained off into the afternoon.

Power service has improved since installation in late March of newly arrived container generators that are supplementing the generating capacity at the MEC power plant.

## Slick effort to create plan on oil spills

In a landmark collaboration, five Hawaii-based active duty members of the US Coast Guard's 14th District and the Marine Environmental Response team from the newly established Regional Activities Center, alongside a scientific support coordinator from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association, joined forces with the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program and the Marshall Islands Environmental Protection Authority to initiate an Oil Spill Task Force in Majuro last week.

Over the course of a productive week, the team made significant progress in developing a National Contingency Plan for the Marshall Islands.

"This plan is a major step forward in preparing for future oil spill responses in the region, providing a foundation to revisit national laws and further enhance the protection of the RMI against the backdrop of increasing vessel traffic and associated risks," stated Lt. Cmdr. Jesse Harms, the US Coast Guard 14th District chief of marine and environmental response.

The task force's formation marks the beginning of a sustained effort by the US Coast Guard to support the RMI in enhancing its oil spill response and preparedness capabilities. The collaboration will continue with the plan's development, leading to workshops and exercises designed to strengthen interagency partnerships within

the RMI. A stakeholder meeting involving RMI's Ports Authority, Immigration, Customs, EPA, Ministry of Transportation, Communications and Technology, and the police department was held on April 4 at the Robert Reimers Hotel conference room to develop the draft plan.

"It was such a pleasure to host the team from the US and SPREP, the level of environmental expertise and experience within the group is incredible," said Moriana Phillip, general manager of the RMI EPA. "We are looking forward to this work and we are positive that this is a goal we can achieve in the next few months."

The task force's progress was highlighted in a briefing to President Hilda Heine and her cabinet. The US Coast Guard team expressed gratitude for the RMI leadership's support in this critical, long-term effort.

The initiative has been energized by the RMI EPA's recent experience managing an oil spill from a sunken fishing vessel in Majuro, providing valuable insights into the challenges and necessities of oil spill response.

"We look forward to further collaboration. The leadership and dedication of Ms. Moriana Phillip and her team at the RMI EPA are instrumental to the project's success and the development of a robust framework for oil spill response in the Marshall Islands," said Harms.



**Officials with the US Coast Guard and Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program joined with RMI EPA to develop plans for effective oil spill response actions by the RMI government.**



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