

Marshallese Out-Migration Intensifies

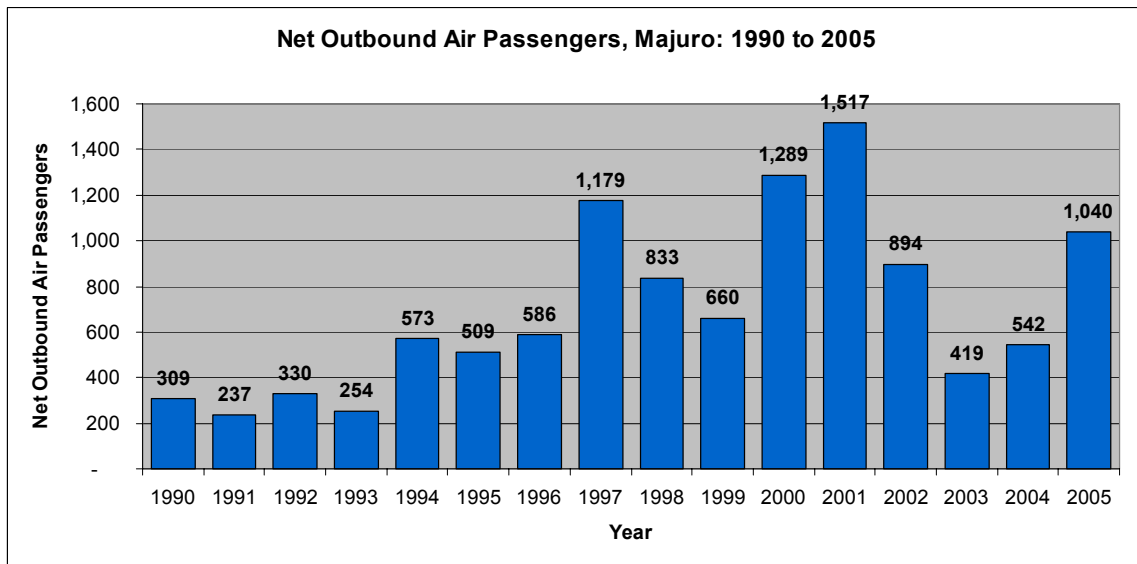
by Ben Graham

International air passenger movement data from the US Department of Transportation TranStats Database show that net embarkations (or outbound passengers) from the RMI have doubled in recent years, suggesting strongly that that out-migration has sharply intensified.

A total of 16,397 passengers arrived at Majuro and Kwajalein airports in 2005, while a total of 17,420 passengers departed. This means that over 1,000 more people departed than arrived (see data table below) and indicates that out-migration is again on an upward trajectory.

While a portion of this outbound traffic consists of transiting passengers (such as fishing vessel crews who arrive in the RMI via sea and depart via plane) or one-way migrants from neighboring island areas, the bulk of the traffic consists of Marshallese out-migrants to the US.

Most of the out-migration is from Majuro Atoll. A total of 10,436 passengers departed Majuro in 2005 while 9,396 arrived, yielding a net of 1,040 outbound passengers. This is nearly double the number from Majuro in 2004 (542) and more than double the number in 2003 (419). Meanwhile, net passenger movements on Kwajalein Atoll have been very stable in the past two years. Kwajalein had 11 net outbound and 17 net inbound passengers in 2004 and 2005 (respectively).



Source: United States Department of Transportation, TranStats Database 2006.

Migration trends parallel major economic and social events in the RMI. Emigration appears to have first spiked in 1997, when major public sector downsizing was taking place under the Public Sector Reform Program. Those made jobless received severance packages of thousands of dollars and so had both the means and the incentive to emigrate.

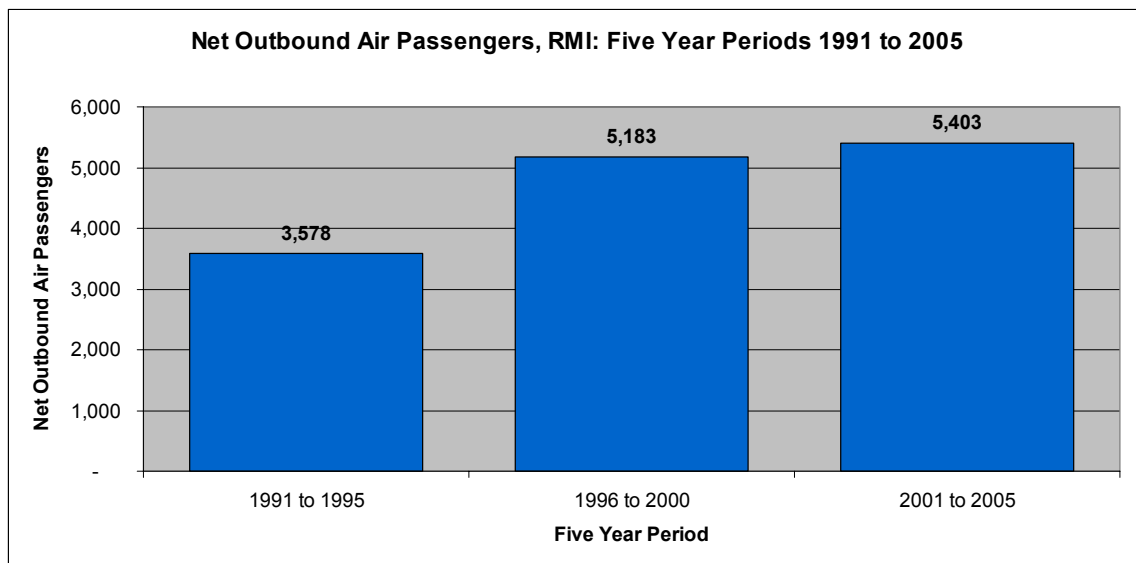
From 2000 to 2002, two significant events would have further encouraged emigration. First, certain sections of the Compact were to expire in 2001, and the fear was widespread that the US would restrict immigration, prompting a *rush for the gates* effect. Second, the Nuclear Claims Tribunal made during this period its highest ever payouts compensating personal injuries, in late 2001 and the first half of 2002 disbursing over \$16 million. Many of the recipients reportedly migrated to the US almost immediately (*Juumemmej: RMI 2005 Social and Economic Report*).

Today, continued economic stagnation, high and growing unemployment (particularly among younger Marshallese), rising poverty, growing social problems, and a weak and limited education system are the likely factors contributing to high out-migration. These factors continue to *push* Marshallese to migrate abroad in search of better opportunities and living conditions.

Over the longer term, from 1990 to 2005, the RMI had more than 14,000 net outbound passengers. The vast majority of these were Marshallese who now reside in Hawaii, California, Oregon, Arkansas, and other US states. The largest community of Marshallese in the US, located in northwest Arkansas, had upwards of 3,000 to 4,000 members in 2001 and this has likely doubled by 2006.

In the past five year period (from 2001 to 2005), the RMI saw a total of 5,403 net outbound passengers, suggesting that out-migration (or “voting with the feet” as it is often called) continues to intensify and has become a major demographic and social phenomenon in the Marshall Islands.

The 2001 to 2005 period saw more out-migration than in the previous two five-year periods. Today, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Marshallese reside in the US, suggesting that around 25 percent of all Marshallese in the world now live abroad.



Source: United States Department of Transportation, TranStats Database 2006.

International Airline Passenger Movements, Majuro and Kwajalein Atolls: 1990 to 2005

Atoll	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Kwajalein																
Disembarkations	6,002	6,652	5,530	5,872	9,140	6,744	5,051	4,719	3,869	4,335	23,190	5,676	7,463	6,813	7,991	7,001
Embarkations	5,682	6,058	5,906	6,548	9,113	7,988	5,105	4,955	3,791	4,132	23,817	6,292	7,482	7,175	8,002	6,984
Majuro																
Disembarkations	6,636	7,078	7,194	7,633	7,822	8,024	8,160	8,111	8,227	8,776	8,893	9,392	9,548	10,084	9,406	9,396
Embarkations	6,945	7,315	7,524	7,887	8,395	8,533	8,746	9,290	9,060	9,436	10,182	10,909	10,442	10,503	9,948	10,436
Kwajalein net embarkations	(320)	(594)	376	676	(27)	1,244	54	236	(78)	(203)	627	616	19	362	11	(17)
Majuro net embarkations	309	237	330	254	573	509	586	1,179	833	660	1,289	1,517	894	419	542	1,040
RMI net embarkations	(11)	(357)	706	930	546	1,753	640	1,415	755	457	1,916	2,133	913	781	553	1,023
Net embarkations 1990 to 2005	14,153															
Net embarkations 1991 to 1995	3,578															
Net embarkations 1996 to 2000	5,183															
Net embarkations 2001 to 2005	5,403															

Source: US Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, TranStats Database

Notes: data include international movements only; movements include travelers visiting the RMI, travelers in transit, and migrants.