

THE PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM 2014

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The 45th Pacific Islands Forum was held in Palau from 29-31 July 2014. It was attended by 14 members of the Forum, two associate members and eight observers. Regional organisations were also present. The theme for the conference was “The Ocean: Life and Future”. This theme was supported by the Forum with its adoption of the Palau Declaration on “The Ocean: Life and Future, Charting a Course to Sustainability”.¹ That theme with its strong environmental aspect also served to make the Forum meeting a good precursor to both the UN Secretary General’s Climate Change Summit 2014 and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) meeting (the Third International Conference on SIDS) which with its associated activities ran from 25 August to 4 September in Samoa.

The Palau Declaration on “The Ocean: Life and Future” presents in 16 paragraphs a strong statement about the Pacific Ocean, its importance to the people of the region and a call to action on the protection and sustainable use of the ocean and its resources.

Attached to the Declaration is a register of information relating to the ocean areas and commitments of the state members of the Forum. This register is a 13 page document with useful data in an accessible form. In respect of New Zealand, for instance, it records that New Zealand has an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of approximately 4 million square kilometres, that it has confirmed rights to approximately 1.7 million square kilometres of seabed outside the EEZ, and that, with France and Tuvalu submissions were made in respect of the outer limits of the continental shelf. It noted that New Zealand strongly supports conservation and management of fishing on the high seas in the zone of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission and that it is actively engaged with electronic navigation charts and hydrographic surveys.

The SIDS Conference in turn had a major emphasis on environmental matters and provided an opportunity for the many nations that attended to prepare a united voice for the UN Secretary General’s Climate Change Summit in New York on 23 September 2014 and, looking forward, for significant contributions to the global sustainable development goals and the post-2015 agenda.

The Pacific Plan of 2005 was under review for the Palau meeting. As a result of that review, the Pacific Plan has been replaced by the Framework for Pacific Regionalism.² That Framework is founded on a view of Pacific regionalism as:³

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1 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat “Palau Declaration on “The Ocean: Life and Future’ Charting a Course to Sustainability” (31 July 2014) <<http://www.forumsec.org>>.

2 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat “The Framework for Pacific Regionalism” (July 2014) <<http://www.forumsec.org>>.

3 At 1.

The expression of a common sense of identity and purpose, leading progressively to the sharing of institutions, resources, and markets, with the purpose of complementing national efforts, overcoming common constraints, and enhancing sustainable and inclusive development within Pacific countries and territories and for the Pacific region as a whole.

The approach of the Framework is quite different from that of the Pacific Plan and, at least at this early stage, appears to be more action oriented and more pragmatic than the idealist Pacific Plan. In the fields of particular interest to law, harmonisation, economic integration and institutional integration are identified as appropriate matters for collective action. Some of the ideas are not new but they will get fresh impetus from the adoption of the Framework. On the harmonisation side, the commitment is to common policies, standards and processes. The goal will be achieved by action at national level through “legally binding arrangements”. These arrangements may well be analogous to Directives of the European Union in that it will be for each country to legislate internally to meet shared regional goals. Similar provisions are included for economic integration which involves “freer movement of people and goods”⁴. As far as administrative or institutional integration is concerned, the Framework speaks of common rules, standards and institutions. The legislative side is muted in comparison to the harmonisation and economic integration action points. For integration the indication is that there will be binding arrangements which will include “commitment to national resource allocation and to operating within regionally mandated requirements”⁵. The Framework requires Pacific countries to prioritise the regional initiatives and sets out an administrative procedure for dealing with proposals and their monitoring. Additionally, in Annex 1 of the Framework, there is a series of tests which will determine whether an initiative should be proceeded with. The criteria indicate that an initiative should not involve a service that the market can appropriately deal with and equally should not involve a matter which is currently being dealt with by another organisation or process.⁶ The intention is clearly to ensure that initiatives undertaken at the regional level produce benefits and that they do not duplicate initiatives being undertaken by others. Any initiative should “maintain the degree of effective sovereignty held by national governments”⁷. It is the countries of the Pacific which will make the decisions.

As in recent years, Fiji was a topic of discussion and the Communiqué records that the Forum leaders requested that the Ministerial Contact Group report to the leaders immediately following the election in Fiji in September 2014.⁸ On the basis of that report, the leaders would consider the re-admission of Fiji to participation in all Forum activities.

4 At 4.

5 At 4.

6 At 10.

7 At 10.

8 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat “Forum Communiqué” (31 July 2014) <<http://www.forumsec.org>> at 4.

Tokelau was an observer at this 45th Forum meeting. Its application for associated membership was accepted. Tokelau will therefore participate in future Forum meetings as an associate member along with French Polynesia and New Caledonia.

The candidacy of New Zealand for the 2015-2016 seat in the United Nations Security Council was again supported by the leaders. The specific Forum interest identified in the Communiqué is that New Zealand would “maintain a Pacific voice in the world’s primary body”⁹. The Communiqué also noted the leaders’ concern that the Forum decisions be adhered to at the time of voting by New Zealand in the Security Council.

The term of Secretary-General Tuiloma Neroni Slade has come to an end and Dame Meg Taylor was appointed as the Secretary-General of the Forum for the next three years. Dame Meg Taylor is the first woman to serve as Secretary-General of the Forum.¹⁰ In recent years she has served as the ambassador of Papua New Guinea to Mexico, United States and Canada and has also worked as a senior official at the World Bank.

The post-Forum dialogue partners¹¹ continued to play an important role at the Forum. Cuba was a member of this group for the first time.¹²

The Forum decided the hosts for Forum meetings for the next five years. The host for 2015 is Papua New Guinea.

9 At 5.

10 To be noted also is the presence of the two Deputy Secretaries-General, Cristelle Pratt and Andie Fong Toy. Andie Fong Toy was until 2008 a Director in the Forum Secretariat.

11 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat “Post Forum Dialogue” <<http://www.forumsec.org>>.

12 The relationship of Cuba to the Pacific is an interesting one. A useful overview is given in the address of the Cuban ambassador to the post-Forum dialogue meeting: <<http://www.islandsbusiness.com>>.

