

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY GREG URWIN, SECRETARY GENERAL
PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM SECRETARIAT
AT THE
PASIFIKA PROJECT : AUCKLAND DIALOGUE
AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND
THURSDAY 30 AUGUST 2007**

Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for the opportunity to join you this morning. If I may, I'd like to make a few remarks this morning on two inter-related matters.

2. The first of these pertains to the way the Pacific Island country region is perceived, particularly by those who have an interest in the region, but who are, to some degree, external to it. The second relates to the nature of the broad, long-term relationship which needs to be fashioned among the states and territories of the region, and particularly as between the island states on the one side, and New Zealand and Australia on the other.

3. But first, on the grounds that you should take whatever opportunities are on offer, and because it is part of the context, may I begin with just a little on the organisation I have the privilege of working for – the Pacific Islands Forum.

4. The Pacific Islands Forum is now some thirty-six years old. It was founded by five Pacific Island Countries – Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Cook Islands and Nauru and, after some debate, debate which continues to have meaning for some of the issues we now face, New Zealand and Australia, and it met,

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

at leader level, for the first time in 1971. It was, at the outset, both an expression of the newly established political independence of the Pacific Islands region – a process still very much in train in 1971 – and of the desire to explore the benefits of regional cooperation.

5. As is the way of such things, the Forum has grown considerably over the intervening years. From the outset, it was felt, although not quite unanimously, that the new body required a Secretariat to assist it in achieving its aims. It now has a country membership of sixteen – built up as first the Melanesian and atoll states achieved their independence and then as the Micronesian States, former US Trust Territories, developed their Compacts of Free Association with the United States. It now has a regular dialogue relationship with, this year, fourteen external partners, and conducts business with a broad range of other entities. It began with an agenda based largely on economic, trade and what I suppose one might call, functional cooperation and now has one that pretty much runs the gamut – political, security, governance and social issues make up a substantial part of our work. And the Forum, and the Secretariat, now co-exist with, work closely with and have a role in coordinating the work of a range of other regional agencies, one of which, the Pacific Community, the former South Pacific Commission, pre-dated us and the remainder of which were established to meet a number of the region's more specialised needs. It was partly because of the limitations imposed upon the newly independent states within the old South Pacific Commission, dominated as it was by the region's colonial powers that the Forum came into being. I need to add that the Pacific Community, in which the US, France and their territories all take part, is not like that now. In the past couple of years we have, with those other agencies, been doing substantial work in developing and implementing the Pacific Plan – of which a little more later.

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

6. Commenting from a regional perspective gives me a slightly sneaky opportunity to generalise, although there is a very real question here about how far it is actually possible to do that. It's a question that crashes in on me pretty much every morning I turn up for work. Just in what sense are we talking about a region here? Is it something which coheres, naturally, or are we a region because history, and I suppose those who founded the South Pacific Commission in 1947, said we were. That's not an inconsiderable question, especially for someone whose primary task is to make regional cooperation work. In general, I think that even regionalism's best friends would have to conclude that the factors which keep us apart remain as strong as those which draw us together, although this does vary from issue to issue, and there have been some notable examples of unity over the years. One of the key questions – for me at least – is the extent to which disunity factors are likely to prevail in the future, or whether this is likely to change substantially. It seems to me that the answer to that question will have not a little to do with the way New Zealand approaches its relationships in the region in the coming years.

7. I suppose it is really the need to generalise which gives rise to those clichés which stand in the way of useful analysis. And, in recent years we have, so far as the region is concerned – and to generalise – swapped one of these clichés for another. We are, of course, familiar with both of them. From peaceful, friendly backwater to arc of instability in the course of one generation. It is not hard to pick holes in clichés, but let me seek to do so anyway, partly because they seem to me to clearly have a fair bit to do with the way inter-actions with the region are shaped, even I think in New Zealand, where identification with the region is stronger than it is anywhere else, stronger perhaps, in a number of ways than it is in some island countries themselves.

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

8. Of course, as everywhere else, the situation in the South Pacific Islands region is a rich and varied one and it always has been. It's pointless, now, to berate so many of the white suited British, Australian and New Zealand administrators who wrote their memoirs of the thirties, forties and fifties in terms which had as one of their underlying assumptions that they were observing or involved in a relatively slow evolutionary process, so far as potential and social development was concerned. Their own world view led them to do so, and it is a rare person who transcends that. I dwell on this now only because attitudes such as these created some of the moral atmosphere in which independence was actually achieved, and it lives to this day. Some of the scholarship of more recent years gives us a much better sense of what was going on, politically, socially, culturally as part of the indigenous dynamic at the same time as the colonial administrations were going about their own business. I never tire of recommending Malama Melesia's book "The Making of Modern Samoa", in my view, something of a classic in the way it illustrates the way colonial and Samoan politics rubbed up against one another as both developed through the first half of the 20th century. And I offer this point, a bit obscurely, I guess, because there is something of an unconscious tendency on the part of those working in and with the region –New Zealanders, Australians, other external partners – even those of us who may have a fairly accurate sense of the cultural and historical richness of the region – to assume that, somehow, it all started on the date of political independence. It didn't of course, and the fact that it didn't has much to do with the condition of the Pacific as we see it now, and our knowledge of this may help us to judge the extent of our real effectiveness when we engage with the Pacific Island Countries.

9. Of course, in terms of their inter-actions with the external world, it did, in a number of senses, start on independence day. Quite suddenly, these

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

entities were judged as states, where previously they had been a mixture of strategic outpost, expression of imperial reach, producer of raw materials and administrative responsibility. Only in the cases of Samoa and Fiji, I think, could the process which led to political independence be thought of as incremental and purposeful and you would probably get some argument about that too. As recently as the late 1960s, Paul Hasluck, certainly one of the most thoughtful of those in Australia involved in Pacific affairs at that time, was writing of an independence schedule for Papua New Guinea which stretched decades into the future. The fact of Vanuatu's independence, in 1980, was contested by one of the colonial powers right up to the moment of its achievement and beyond. And by the time Solomon Islands achieved its independence in 1978, the British imperial impulse had certainly lost its vigour; Britain had only begun to discuss independence with Solomon Islanders in the early 1970s and the first substantially elected Legislative Assembly had only been established in 1974, four short years before independence itself. By way of digression, Tonga represents something of an exception to the general picture, and in a different sense from Fiji and Samoa. The British established a protectorate there in the years after 1900, but Tonga did not quite share the full colonial experience of its neighbours, thanks in substantial measure to the strong leadership provided for a long stretch of the nineteenth century by King George Tupou and his advisers. What we are seeing in Tonga now is an example of an enduring, largely locally derived political system addressing change in much the same way as will be familiar to students of Western political history, but of course with Tongan characteristics. In the general context of what you may be discussing here today, some might be inclined to argue that Tonga's economic and social indicators might have been better if change had come earlier and been more akin to political developments elsewhere in the region. In the light of some of that neighbouring experience, one does, however, wonder.

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

10. But, as they say, I digress. The decolonisation process in the region had, then, a generally rushed quality about it. Perhaps, to some extent, that is inherent in any decolonisation process, I don't know, but I can imagine African or Caribbean leaders saying much the same thing. But it is not the less true for that; compared to what had gone on in the decades before, it was a speeded up process. It happened because Britain, Australia and New Zealand – although not thusfar France nor, in a somewhat different way, the United States – responding to changes in the international climate, found it to be in their interest for it to happen, and because local political elites, taking advantage of those same climate changes, were headed in the same broad direction, although it is, as a footnote, interesting to note, for example, the uncertainties about the future expressed to the UN Decolonisation Committee by Kiribati and Tuvalu at the time of their independence. An uncertainty perhaps mirrored in the associative relationships which the Cook Islands and Niue have developed with New Zealand, in the recent referendum result in Tokelau and indeed in the range of opinion one encounters in the French territories about the independence option.

11. The other substantial point one is inclined to make about the political independence process in the Pacific is that it did not happen very long ago, certainly in terms of the gestation period of European states; on one reading, of course, it is a process which remains far from complete. Sir Michael Somare was the first Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea; he is Prime Minister today. Sir Peter Kenilorea was the first Prime Minister of Solomon Islands; he remains an important political figure. Ieremia Tabai, first President of Kiribati, remains a very active Member of Parliament and has just been returned again. Malietoa Tanumafili II, who was appointed joint Head of State when then Western Samoa became independent in 1962, has just passed from among us. Overall, the independence generation in the

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

Pacific has, as it were, turned over, but only just. No less an independence figure than Ratu Mara, whose significance as such extended well beyond Fiji, was still a key political participant as recently as the year 2000.

12. And the independence process we have been referring to – what was it? Well, in rough terms, it was the bolting on of a Westminster, US or French constitutional variant to an existing colonial model, which almost by definition meant big government and which only partly related to politics as actually practiced. To be judgmental about all of that is very much a hindsight view, in all the practical circumstances it is a bit difficult to see how else it might have been done, but it is I think, useful to think about if we are to reach much understanding of what's happening now.

13. We often express satisfaction or relief that the achievement of independence in the region was peaceful, and that is indeed a blessing in any one's terms, although Vanuatu, at least, was a bit of a near miss in that regard. As a generalisation, that view only really holds good, however, if you are talking only about the years in which independence was actually achieved, not in the period which preceded it or followed it. In the independence process, a range of old fissures and fault-lines, unresolved issues from the remote and near past were papered over by new Constitutions, new administrations and in couple of cases, new lines on maps. And that, in substantial part, is what the prolonged Bougainville crisis, Fiji in 1987, 2000 and 2006, the Solomon Islands today has been about – the working out, hopefully the resolution, of some of those old issues. The Solomon Islands seems perhaps the very paradigm of this. During the Second World War, a number of the Pacific Islands, including Solomon Islands, became battlegrounds and their populations found themselves caught by global forces. The sheer trauma of all of that is

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

difficult to recapture, but it fundamentally affected many thousands of people either still living or alive until recently. The origins of the recent Solomon Islands conflict are a contentious and complex issue, but can be traced back at least as far, if not before, the use of Malaitan labour by American Armed Forces during World War 11 on Guadalcanal. At Independence in 1978, Solomon Islands was already experiencing problems in forging a national identity and with the shift from a colonial territory to an independent state. The Western Province of Solomon Islands for example, boycotted the Independence celebrations, desiring instead a political association with Bougainville, which had its own issues when it became part of Papua New Guinea in 1975.

14. While this is a simplistic characterisation of what has in fact been a complex web of cause and effect, it does, I think, make the point that by the time of its birth as a State, Solomon Islands was already dealing with the tension between centralised self government and federalism, as well as the migration of peoples across traditional ethnic boundaries. In this mix was a land tenure system left by the British which did little to organise the mediation of disputes over property ownership between individuals, communities and the state. The management and ownership of alienated and traditional land remains to this day a critical issue, one of a number affecting the prospects for a lasting peace in Solomon Islands.

15. I would not like the drift of these observations to be misunderstood, or regarded as a kind of special pleading. The region has, objectively speaking, a very broad range of problems to grapple with – indifferent economic growth, rapidly increasing populations, uncontrolled drift into urban centres, declining health and education indicators, weaknesses of governance. The litany is very well known to us, and its

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

address needs the sustained and urgent attention of all of us in the Pacific or engaged with it. No one can seriously doubt this. Nor is this a disguised argument for the tolerance of practices which, by any proper standard, no one should countenance. There are after all, standards of traditional governance performance, just as surely as there are for modern governance practices. But, having said all of that, is it just me, have I grown hopelessly complacent in my advancing age or do others who spend time in the Pacific finish up, like me, with a much more complex, conditional sense of what is going on in the region than is allowed for in much modern commentary. To talk of the region's many vulnerabilities is to do no more than acknowledge the truth; to talk of "fragile states" is fine to the extent that it helps us properly understand the region's problems. But context, historical context not least, does seem to me to be critically important. And such references surely need to be balanced by recognition that one or two things may actually be going right. I find it difficult to articulate this with any real precision, but negative views about the success of national experiments in the Pacific, themselves much too broad-brush to be accurate, must surely be balanced by acknowledgement of a pretty fair degree of community success. This seems to me observable in a range of ways – the strength of family and clan life, in the churches, in the devotion parents lavish on their children's schools, in sport, in the plethora of voluntary organisations. We are referring here, of course, to the things which actually make Pacific societies work, and which those who would seek to support Pacific Island Countries need to understand as fully as they can.

16. So, I suppose my general conclusion, unremarkably enough, would be that neither the optimism which accompanied the early independence period in the Pacific, nor the pessimism which succeeded it when some of the bright hopes started to drain away in the early nineties represents the full

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

picture. The kind of incomplete process we saw at independence was, in my view, bound to lead to a period of adjustment. Bearing in mind that a number of the regional states are, in global terms, in any event on something of a hiding to nothing, it can hardly be wondered at that this period may be long and, to external eyes, quite untidy. Again, maybe it's just me, but everywhere I go in the Pacific, I find people, thoughtful people searching for ways to run their countries into the future, to find the structures and methods which will work best for their people. The answers they come up with will vary greatly. The Melanesian countries, for example appear to face tasks of a nation-building kind, such as we might observe in a range of other decolonised states, in Polynesia and Micronesia it might be more a matter of working out and refining the interactions between cultural homelands and significant overseas communities. In every case, I would venture to say, it will be about finding the appropriate accommodation between modern national methods of governance and older priorities and practices. The region's friends need to support this quest and not regard it as some kind of aberration.

17. I'll conclude, if I may, by saying a little about one or two of the regional mechanisms Pacific Leaders are beginning to use to the work out how to deal with the future. They are far from being the only ones, but they may have some relevance to what you will be talking about during your Dialogue.

18. The year 2000 was, in a number of respects, the region's "annus horribilis", although some would argue that 2006 ran it close. In the middle of that year, two dramatic sets of events took place – in May, the Government of Fiji and a number of other citizens were taken hostage in Suva's Parliament House, and shortly afterwards, in what some were

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

tempted to see as something of a copy-cat event, the Government of Solomon Islands, against the background of years of communal strife, was overthrown.

19. The Forum Leaders sought to respond. The regional Foreign Ministers met in Apia in August 2000 to address the situation, and out of that meeting came a recommendation that existing regional arrangements be strengthened to allow the Forum to respond to members' requests for help in times of crisis.

20. When the Leaders came together later in the year in Kiribati, they adopted an instrument which they called the Biketawa Declaration, so named because that small island was the venue for the Leaders' Retreat that year. Biketawa enunciated a number of guiding principles and possible courses of action considered relevant to circumstances of regional upheaval. Leaders "while respecting the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of another member state", recognised "the need in time of crisis or in response to members' request for assistance, for action to be taken on the basis of all members of the Forum being part of the Pacific Islands extended family". The Forum must, they said, constructively address difficult and sensitive issues, including underlying causes of tensions and conflict.

21. The Declaration outlined a modest enough set of proposals, a series of graded procedural steps to address potential or actual conflict but again these proposals, and their apparent modesty, do have to be seen against their historical background. Biketawa is interesting, regionally speaking, in at least two ways. First, it amounted to the first explicit recognition that the internal affairs of a member state might in certain circumstances be the legitimate concern of the Forum as a whole; that the

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

problems of one might be the problems of all. Secondly, it represented the first attempt, in a direct sense, to assemble a vehicle for conflict prevention, even though it was clear that the Secretary General, in particular, had to be pretty careful about arriving at the conclusion that a crisis situation might exist. Biketawa has been invoked three times since 2000, most notably, perhaps in respect of Solomon Islands. In 2001-2002, the Secretary General used it to explore possible avenues for the Forum and the Secretariat to play a role in bringing the conflict to an end. And in July 2003, the Biketawa Declaration was the enabling mechanism through which the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands was mounted.

22. This being the world, there has been inevitably, but I think in the end superficially, some cynicism attending the assistance mission arrangements – it was, some said, simply an Australian/New Zealand show cloaked in regional rhetoric. Not, in the end, a fair call, in my view, for two reasons. I think that, for the foreseeable future, it is likely to be a fact of regional life that efforts of this kind will need to be underwritten by those regional members with relatively greater access to resources. There seems to me to be little problem in principle with this, provided the action contemplated has genuinely shared regional objectives. In the case of the Solomons' intervention this was certainly true. And secondly, I think the cynical view simply underrates the practical commitment thus far demonstrated by the Forum Island Countries, a commitment now reinforced by some of the new consultative measures put in place this year.

23. The second occasion on which Biketawa has been invoked was in 2004 by Nauru, in the context of its ongoing financial crisis. The Leaders, at their meeting in Apia in August 2004 agreed that the Forum should do all it could practically do to assist Nauru. In the context of the developing

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

process I have been trying to describe what seems to me interesting and positive about what the Leaders have directed here is that it represents the use of the Biketawa instrument at what might be thought of as a conflict prevention stage.

24. The most recent occasion on which Biketawa was invoked was in respect of the coup in Fiji in December 2006 and the works the Forum has been doing to support Fiji's return to democracy. This is important, difficult work for the organisation. It remains unfinished.

25. There are several features of the Biketawa Declaration that make it unusual and potentially very useful to this region. Not least of these is its holistic view of the importance of upholding democratic processes, its commitment to good governance, and its recognition of indigenous rights and cultural values. This balanced view, can I believe, help the region deal with various of the security threats it faces. It is, I think, something, a quite significant something to put in the positive side of the balance, viewed as it should be, as an indication of regional Leaders' willingness to address regional problems, rather than simply be their victims.

26. Another of these positive developments is the Pacific Plan, adopted by the Forum Leaders at their October 2005 meeting in Port Moresby. It is now in the first phase of its implementation. I've spoken about it exhaustively on a range of previous occasions so if you don't altogether mind, I will give myself and you a break by refraining from doing so now. It's not a very good name in many ways – too Stalinist, too definite, implying too much comprehensiveness. It is a thing of parts.

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

27. What it is, is first an attempt to make a statement about various regionally shared priorities, and that has considerable value. Secondly it establishes a process through which the region may explore, identify and act upon a range of measures which will hopefully deepen the level of regional cooperation and may allow us to move over time, in certain areas to something we might be able to recognise as regional integration. Its initiatives are organised in terms of four goals – economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security, are scheduled for accomplishment over a number of years and are of basically two categories. The first category would seek to strengthen activities at a national level by use of a regionally-based resource; better versions of what is done now. The second category would involve the actual provision on a regional basis of a service previously provided country by country. A regional statistics service or a regional audit office might be cases in point. To the extent we take this path, we shall be moving towards a form of closer regional integration.

28. That said, it is early days yet and it is hard to predict how far the Plan may be developed and in what directions. As I've observed, there is still much which divides us, and that is likely to be the case for some time yet. As it stands, its methodology is avowedly incremental – the build-up, over time, of sufficient discrete measures of regional cooperation to gradually produce a new, different kind of dynamic. But it is a new response, in its way, a quite far-sighted attempt to meet some of our common challenges in practical terms. It has achieved a good deal of support among the region's development partners, and expectations of it within the region are not inconsiderable. Encouragingly, its initiatives are being increasingly built into national development plans, a critical linkage, I think, if we are to get anywhere, and one made possible partly by the Secretariat's

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

new ability, with New Zealand's support, to establish a physical presence in a number of our member states. It gives the region a shared script, which goes some way to expressing shared regional objectives. It is another of those positive elements in our regional situation which, in my view, should be built upon.

29. Finally, the Pacific Plan does contain one particular initiative which is, as they say, pregnant with possibility and merits particular attention in the context of this meeting. It is for, to quote the Plan itself: "the investigation of the potential impacts under the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) of a move towards a comprehensive framework for trade (including services) and economic cooperation between Australia, New Zealand and the Forum Island Countries". Rather tentatively put, I know, but for mine a potentially very significant item. As it currently stands, PACER confines itself to establishing a two-way free trade in goods between Australia, New Zealand and the Forum Island Countries. This is, of course, a completely inadequate expression of the totality of the relationships among those entities – nor was it meant to be so. But to leave this matter within a narrow trade framework – even if it finishes up including services and capacity building elements – would be to miss a big opportunity in a most unfortunate way. An opportunity for what? Basically, I believe, to develop a broad and durable expression of the nature of the relationship between the island countries on the one side, and the two proximate metropolises on the other, "a settlement" if you like. What might such an expression be made up of? The narrowest reading of the formulation contained in the Pacific Plan implies a development dimension of some kind. In turn, the narrowest reading of that would presumably confine it to capacity building in trade related areas. We should, surely, be talking in wider terms than that. Perhaps a genuine two way trade arrangement covering goods and services

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

could be underpinned by broad, long-term undertakings which would see the delivery of development assistance through mechanisms designed to strengthen policy ownership on the recipient side. This would involve more use of what, for want of a better term, would amount of direct budget support of a kind already undertaken in certain circumstances by New Zealand and Australia, for example through their participation in a range of trust fund arrangements. I'm not suggesting that this would be an automatic sort of arrangement. It would need to be worked out case by case, country by country, on the basis of their specific policy aims and their ability to deliver certain agreed outcomes. Receipt of such support would need, of course, to be accompanied by certain undertakings as to its use, both process-wise and in terms of the purposes to which it might be devoted. I'm trying here to avoid the use of the word governance, given some of its reflexive connotations, but that is what it would boil down to – agreement, perhaps, to pursue globally recognised standards relating to the rule of law, the management of public finances, and poverty reduction policies. In turn, such undertakings might be reinforced by some general understandings as to the movement of people around our region, not expressed simply in services trade terms but in terms which recognise the inter-dependence of our communities.

30. When you start breaking down such an enterprise into its possible components, it doesn't seem all that startling to me. Most of what I've just referred is at most, an extension of policies and activities already underway. What would be of lasting value would be the setting in which such components would be placed. A setting which recognised the linkages between the various things New Zealand and Australia do in and with the region. A setting which recognised that we are all in the region becoming increasingly inter-dependent, and that this condition will be permanent. In

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

other words, a final recognition by New Zealand and Australia that for them the Pacific region is special and like no other and that it is not some kind of unavoidable responsibility, but a community of which they are part, and which their own destinies are intimately bound up with. When I say this, incidentally, I do not, for a moment, imply that New Zealand and Australia stand in the same position in relation to the Pacific region. By almost any demonstrable measure, New Zealand has accepted, to a much greater extent than Australia, that it is actually a part of the region. Given the difference between the two countries, perhaps that will always be the case and perhaps there may be advantages for all of us in that. But for both, and even if in different ways, it is a principle which needs to be etched in stone.

31. Ladies and Gentlemen, The imprecision with which I have discussed this matter is perhaps a signal of the complexities which may lie before us if we go down this path. But I must say that I do have a conviction, which I can only partly articulate to myself, that we need something bigger, a broad understanding which takes us beyond the day-to-day, the reactivity, the pessimism, to a level where we shall all have a better chance of really coming to terms with one another.

32. Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your patience in allowing me to meander through these issues this morning. I hope I have provided some kind of basis for what is to follow. My best wishes for the Dialogue.