

THE PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM 2012

AH ANGELO*

The 43rd Pacific Islands Forum was held in Rarotonga, Cook Islands, from 28 to 30 August 2012. Fifteen states of the Forum were represented. New Caledonia and French Polynesia attended as Associate Members and there were a number of Observers which included two of the Pacific colonial territories, Tokelau and American Samoa. Australia, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and New Zealand were acknowledged by the Cook Islands' Government for their assistance in the hosting of the Forum.

Fiji remained suspended from the workings of the Forum. The leaders renewed their desire for a return by Fiji to parliamentary democracy and repeated their willingness to assist Fiji to achieve that outcome.

The agenda of the Forum was a predictable one and standard agenda items were canvassed: sustainable economic development, fisheries initiatives, and climate change resolutions.

A particular and very positive feature of the Forum was the number of bilateral and other treaty arrangements which were finalised in the wings of the main conference. For example, New Zealand and Kiribati signed a treaty in respect of the maritime boundary between Tokelau and Kiribati. Niue and the Cook Islands signed a treaty in respect of their maritime boundary.

A special initiative endorsed by the Forum was the Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration.¹ It appears as Annex 1 to the Forum Communiqué. It is notable not only in respect of the Declaration itself but for the commitment by Australia of A\$320 million to fund the programme supporting the Declaration over the coming 10 years. The Declaration is concerned with lifting the status of women in the Pacific and their empowerment as active participants in economic, political and social life. The Declaration indicates five principal areas for action: gender responsive government programmes and policies (for example, incorporate the articles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women into legislation); decision-making (for example, specific legislation to establish reserved seats for women in government); economic empowerment; protection against violence; and health and education. It was agreed that leaders would report on progress with implementing the Declaration at each Forum meeting.

The review of the Forum Secretariat was again the subject of comment, and focus was placed on the consideration of the core business of the Secretariat and its management structure in the context of the review of the Pacific Plan.

* Professor of Law, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

1 An interesting comparison may be made with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Gender and Development Protocol of 2008.

Hilary Clinton, Secretary of State for the United States of America (US), joined the Forum delegates for the Post-Forum Dialogue on 31 August.² Her speech emphasised the historical role of the US in the Pacific and indicated continuing and strengthening US interest in the Pacific. The general tone of the address was one of reassurance to the Pacific islands' leaders of US support for their endeavours. US\$32 million of new programme money for initiatives identified by the Pacific island countries was announced. The priority indicated was for sustainable development and protection of natural resources. The gender initiative of the Australian Government was applauded. There was also brief mention of regional security which, with reference to the European Union and states in the North Pacific, concluded with the statement: "I think, after all, the Pacific is big enough for all of us."

The themes of Hilary Clinton's speech were picked up in the remarks of John Key, the Prime Minister of New Zealand. In his speech, and the question and answer session for him and Mrs Clinton that followed, there was rather greater focus on strategic interests and particularly on matters of balancing political influence and the role of China in the South Pacific and the region generally.

The Forum constitution remains the Agreement Establishing the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, done at Tarawa, Republic of Kiribati on 30 October 2000. The Agreement Establishing the Pacific Islands Forum, done at Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea on 27 October 2005, which would replace the 2000 document, has been signed by all members, but ratified by few. The Rarotonga meeting exhorted members to ratify the 2005 Agreement.

Support by Forum leaders for Australia and New Zealand in their respective candidatures for a seat in the United Nations Security Council was reaffirmed.

The overall impression is that the 43rd Pacific Islands Forum was a successful one. The members departed Rarotonga with celebration of the 10th anniversary of Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in prospect and looking with optimism to the 44th meeting of the Forum in the Marshall Islands in 2013.

2 Her speech can be found at: <www.state.gov>.