Political Reviews

The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 2009
NIC MACLELLAN

Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2009
DAVID CHAPPELL, JON FRAENKEL, SOLOMON KANTHA, GORDON LEUA NANAU, HOWARD VAN TREASe, MURIDAN WIDJOJO

© 2010 by University of Hawai‘i Press
The suspension of Fiji’s interim administration from membership in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) dominated regional affairs in 2009. With Australia taking over as Forum chair after the August 2009 Forum leaders meeting in Cairns, the political isolation of Fiji has had impacts on regional aid, trade, and development.

At the same time, there is increasing debate over the capacity of regional organizations to respond to the challenges of climate change and the global economic crisis, as donor countries work to better coordinate development assistance and Pacific governments extend diplomatic links to new players in the region.

Throughout 2009, the Pacific faced a number of natural disasters and the year ended with Island governments and community organizations raising the profile of vulnerable atoll nations at the Copenhagen climate negotiations. However, most delegates left the Danish capital disappointed, as the summit ended without a legally binding treaty to mandate global action on the adverse effects of climate change.

After Fiji Interim Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama failed to attend the 2008 Pacific Islands Forum in Niue, Forum leaders held a special meeting in Port Moresby on 27 January 2009 to discuss the restoration of democracy in Fiji. Bainimarama again failed to attend, and regional leaders agreed they would move to suspend Fiji from Forum membership unless “the Fiji Interim Government nominates an election date by 1 May 2009 and that election is held by the end of December 2009” (Forum Secretariat 2009a).

After the January meeting, Bainimarama stated: “The Forum has gone beyond its mandate. The Forum was never meant to determine what type of government members should have. Indeed, the Forum was never to decide when an election in a member state should be held” (Cooney 2009).

Any possibility of an early announcement on elections was dashed when the military reacted to the Fiji Court of Appeal ruling in the case of Qarase v Bainimarama, brought by ousted Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. On 9 April 2009, the court ruled that the 2006 coup was “illegal” and the postcoup creation of an interim administration “invalid.” On 10 April, Fiji President Ratu Sir Josefa Iloilo formally abrogated the 1997 Fiji Constitution. Backed by the military-led interim administration, the president dismissed senior judges and statutory officeholders. He then issued a decree allowing himself to appoint a prime minister, opening the way for the reappointment of Bainimarama and his interim ministers.

Ruling by decree, the interim administration moved to extend emergency regulations that limit public gatherings and allow media censorship. Over the coming months, these powers were used to harass reporters and critics of the regime, including the Methodist Church, whose annual conference was banned (Amnesty International 2009).
military officers taking key public service positions (including naval officer Esala Teleni as police commissioner), domestic critics faced new restrictions that constrained public criticism of the military as well as the right to strike. Opponents of the regime used blogs to send information internationally, as mainstream media faced censorship of any broadcast or publication that, according to President Iloilo, “could cause disorder, promote disaffection or public alarm or undermine the government or state of Fiji” (Gordon 2009).

As the Forum’s May deadline passed, Forum Chair Toke Talagi, premier of Niue, announced on 2 May: “It is with considerable sorrow and disappointment that I confirm the suspension of the current military regime in the Republic of the Fiji Islands, from full participation in the Pacific Islands Forum, with immediate effect from 2 May 2009. . . . This decision does not amount to the expulsion of Fiji, as a nation, from its membership of the Forum. That proposition has not been considered by leaders in their deliberations. As such, the Pacific Islands Forum remains a 16-member body and the Republic of the Fiji Islands continues to be part of the Forum group of nations, albeit with participation of the current regime suspended until further notice” (Talagi 2009).

Fiji was also suspended from the Commonwealth in September after the interim administration failed to meet a Commonwealth deadline of 1 September for committing to rejoin negotiations with the Opposition and to hold credible elections by October 2010. In response to domestic and international pressure, Commodore Bainimarama stated that the Fiji government would not finalize electoral reform until 2012 or hold elections until 2014. Reacting to criticism by Church and community leaders, the military extended the ban on Methodist Church conferences until 2014 and introduced new decrees to crack down on opponents (such as the threat to reduce government pensions for critics).

In the lead-up to the annual Forum meeting in August, held in Cairns, Australia, some Pacific leaders expressed unease about the regional isolation of Fiji, including Sāmoa’s Head of State His Highness Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese and Melanesian Prime Ministers Derek Sikua (Solomon Islands), Sir Michael Somare (Papua New Guinea), and Edward Natapei (Vanuatu). In Cairns, however, Forum leaders reaffirmed Fiji’s suspension from the regional body, with the proviso that members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) could maintain dialogue with Fiji government and officials.

For months, the Fiji interim administration refused to back down on its delay of elections, and regional relations—especially with Australia, New Zealand, and some Polynesian leaders—remained stressed. Travel bans by the United States, Australia, and New Zealand on Fiji government ministers, officials, judges, and their families were maintained. In November, the interim administration expelled the Australian high commissioner and the third in a series of acting New Zealand high commissioners from Suva; in turn, Canberra declared Fiji’s acting high commissioner persona non grata in Australia. The interim administra-
tion then ordered Fiji-born Australian academic Brij V Lal (one of the team who had developed the country’s 1997 constitution) to leave the country. His wife, Padma Narsey Lal, was also refused entry to Fiji to continue her work on environment and development research in January 2010.

By the end of 2009, the New Zealand government indicated that it was willing to engage with the interim administration, opening the way for new dialogue. But there were a number of ongoing disputes, especially over regional trade.

In June 2009, Fiji invoked provisions of the 2001 Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) treaty, calling for consultations to address its suspension from the PACER-Plus negotiations (which aim to develop a new regional free trade agreement linking Australia, New Zealand, and Forum Island countries). However, the Australian government disputed Fiji’s claim that PACER is a stand-alone treaty that is independent from the Agreement Establishing the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. In August, Australian Trade Minister Simon Crean stated that PACER-Plus “is completely separate from the PACER agreement. I recognize the similar names (PACER and PACER-Plus) have the potential to be confusing. But what is disingenuous in that confusion is the attempt by some to find a legal link between the two for the purposes of the Fiji issue” (Crean 2009). In response, nongovernmental organization activists highlighted a series of statements by the Australian government showing that PACER-Plus is a continuation of the PICTA-PACER process (PANG 2009).

By year’s end, only Solomon Islands, Australia, and New Zealand had formally replied to Fiji’s diplomatic initiative on PACER, and Fiji authorities expressed disappointment with the “casual stance” of the Forum Secretariat in facilitating consultations, as part of its legal obligations under article 15 of the treaty. Fiji Foreign Affairs Minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola protested against the exclusion of Fiji from PACER-related events, including PACER-Plus meetings.

In spite of these problems, many Fiji citizens continue to play a role in regional initiatives; for example, in May, Sakiusa Rabuka was appointed to replace Dr Lesi Korovavala as the new Pacific Islands Forum representative in Solomon Islands, to assist with greater Forum engagement in the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

Throughout 2009, key donor nations have been promoting improved development effectiveness and aid coordination in the region. This renewed focus comes as Islands export revenue, tourism receipts, and remittances have all been affected by the global downturn. Western governments are also concerned that a range of players—from China and Taiwan to Cuba and Iran—are increasing aid funding without the conditionality that Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries demand.

In April 2009, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd stood alongside his PNG counterpart, Sir Michael Somare, and acknowledged that Australia’s aid program in Papua New Guinea was top-heavy with consultants, with too little action on the
ground: “Too much money has been consumed by consultants and not enough money was actually delivered to essential assistance in teaching, in infrastructure, in health services on the ground, in the villages, across Papua New Guinea” (Rudd 2009).

This echoed a major speech on the governance of New Zealand’s aid program by John Hayes, Chair of the NZ Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade Select Committee, which criticized the outcomes of aid spending in the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau: “Much of our aid has been used to grow public services across the region—but the hundreds of millions of dollars spent by donors like New Zealand has not lifted the prosperity of the region in a sustained way. . . . What is also clear is that despite the hundreds of millions of dollars that have been poured into the Pacific in recent decades, there has been a relatively modest proportion spent on essential infrastructure” (Hayes 2009).

The new Obama administration also highlighted aid issues, promising to double the nonmilitary US foreign aid budget to US$50 billion a year by 2012. By year’s end, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a major speech on the USAID program and planned an unprecedented regional trip to Hawai‘i, Papua New Guinea, Australia, and New Zealand in 2010 (which was cut short by the Haiti earthquake disaster in January). The US government began a review of the US-Palau Compact of Free Association, as most Compact assistance to Palau was set to expire on 30 September 2009.

Nine Forum member countries have now endorsed the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. After developing a local policy called the Pacific Principles on Aid Effectiveness, which was adopted in Palau in July 2007, regional leaders endorsed a new statement at the Cairns Forum leaders meeting in August 2009, called the Cairns Compact on Strengthening Development Coordination in the Pacific.

The Forum Secretariat is increasingly integrating its programs with key multilateral donors. In March 2009, the Secretariat and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) signed a joint cooperation statement (Forum Secretariat 2009b). This was followed in October by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the World Bank, with cooperation focused on labor mobility, regional economic regulation, petroleum supply chain studies, and strengthening of regional audit capacities (Forum Secretariat 2009c). Pacific governments called on the ADB to realign its regional activities to the Pacific Plan and priorities set by Forum Economic Ministers, including fuel purchase, statistics, customs, labor mobility, and economic regulation.

This agency support is crucial for the development of a key regional initiative—the Pacific Petroleum Program for bulk procurement of fuel—in the face of resistance from major energy corporations. The annual Pacific Plan progress report notes that “some sectors of industry . . . have sought to place pressure on the Forum Secretariat to halt the initiative” (Pacific Plan 2009, 8).

Pacific governments have continued to debate the restructuring of the intergovernmental agencies that make
up the Council of Regional Organizations of the Pacific (CROP). While the merger of the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) will proceed in 2010, the proposed merger of SPC and the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) has been delayed, and discussion of the SPC’s incorporation of the Pacific Aviation Safety Organization is only beginning.

When the Pacific Plan was first announced in 2005, its focus on regional economic integration overshadowed community priorities on better social policy at the national and regional level. After years of advocacy by citizens’ and community organizations, 2009 has seen regional advances in a number of areas of social policy: disability, violence against women, education, and traditional cultural knowledge and intellectual property rights.

In spite of this, government-community relations were set back when Australia and New Zealand announced major funding cutbacks to key regional nongovernment networks based in Suva, including the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organizations (PIANGO) and the Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International (FSPi).

For many years, there has been agitation by health workers and disabled people’s advocacy networks for increased resourcing of services for people living with mental and physical disabilities. The Millennium Framework for Action towards an Inclusive, Barrier-free and Rights-based Society for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific was adopted in Biwako, Japan, in 2002, followed by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006.

Pacific governments have slowly begun to act on the issue. The Forum Secretariat has a full-time regional disability adviser, and AusAID has increased its support for disability programs in the region, with significant personal support from Australia’s parliamentary secretary for development assistance, Bob McMullan.

For the first time ever, in Rarotonga in October 2009, a Forum Disability Ministers Meeting was held to coordinate initiatives and endorse a Pacific Regional Strategy on Disability, which will run from 2010 to 2015.

Long-time Fijian disabled rights campaigner Setareki Macanawai, the chief executive officer of the Pacific Disability Forum, noted: “We are very pleased that Pacific Island Ministers responsible for disability were so enthusiastic in their support for a Pacific Regional Strategy on Disability and we hope that this will be a useful policy and implementation tool to assist countries address national priorities” (Macanawai 2009).

After decades of lobbying and advocacy by women’s groups, Pacific leaders have also made a formal commitment to act on violence against women and children—the first policy on the issue from a Forum leaders’ meeting. At their meeting in Cairns, Forum leaders committed to “eradicating sexual and gender-based violence and ensuring that all individuals have equal protection and access to justice” (Forum Communiqué 2009).

The communiqué adds: “Sexual and gender-based violence is now widely recognized as a risk to human security...
and a potential destabilizing factor for communities and societies alike. It remains pervasive across the Pacific and as it is still considered a sensitive issue in most Pacific cultures, its prevalence often goes underreported.”

Australia issued a major policy statement on violence against women and children in the Pacific, following the release of a study on Violence against Women in Melanesia and East Timor (AusAID 2008). The report documents the extent of violence against women in the home, in the community, and in the workplace, and looks at the best solutions, both global and local.

As well as increasing women’s access to justice and also to support services, a key issue is the prevention of violence through changing community attitudes about violence and women’s status in the home and community. The training and resourcing of police and military forces is another key part of the equation—especially in cases where the disciplined forces have been undisciplined in times of conflict. Women’s groups are advocating better training for police, as police officers are not trained as counselors to support survivors of violence. In countries across the region, police forces are often understaffed (especially with female officers) and lack key resources like housing, cars, and suitable interview rooms.

Other social policy issues were on the regional agenda throughout the year. Pacific education ministers met in March to develop the Pacific Education Development Framework, which replaces the 2001 Forum Basic Education Action Plan, and will focus on “education for all” and training for employment.

In November, Forum member countries also adopted a Traditional Knowledge Action Plan, after many years of work on protecting intellectual property and culture. Cultural issues were on the agenda when more than sixty ariki (chiefs) and leaders from Polynesia gathered at Whaiora Marae in Auckland in September to discuss creation of a government for the Polynesian nations of the region. Customary leaders from Tahiti, Hawai‘i, Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji, and Aotearoa debated land, culture, and proposals such as the removal of passport requirements between Polynesian countries.

This subregional awareness is also reflected in the growing coordination of the larger countries that make up the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG): Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, and the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) independence movement of New Caledonia.

Funding for the MSG office in Port Vila and the proposed Office of the Chief Trade Negotiator (OCTA) was a key issue for Melanesian governments, after Forum leaders agreed in Cairns to proceed with negotiation of the proposed PACER-Plus free trade agreement.

In the lead-up to the Forum leaders’ meeting, Pacific Islands leaders reiterated their need for more time to consider the implications of PACER-Plus, including conducting national consultations prior to the launch of negotiations. But in spite of clear statements from some communities that they needed more time to prepare,
the Cairns Forum in August agreed to commence PACER-Plus negotiations “forthwith.”

In October, Forum trade ministers met in Brisbane to discuss the framework for PACER-Plus negotiations, including timelines, identification of issues, and the OCTA. While the earlier June ministers’ meeting in Apia had indicated that negotiations be completed within two, three, or five years, no definitive decision was made on negotiation timelines at their October meeting. Importantly, the October meeting agreed that “national consultations are essential” and noted that “these consultations will be wide-ranging and include many communities and stakeholders” (Forum Trade Ministers 2009).

The October 2009 trade meeting identified a number of common priority issues including rules of origin, labor mobility, development assistance, and trade facilitation measures. However, there are considerable risks if such support is made contingent on Pacific Island countries signing a reciprocal free trade agreement that obliges Pacific Island nations to give up policy flexibility and liberalize their trade in goods, services, and investment.

Recognizing the need for technical support for the regional trade negotiations, Pacific governments appointed NZ academic Dr Chris Noonan as chief trade adviser in October. While the Australian and New Zealand governments are providing some funds for OCTA, this is insufficient for OCTA to carry out its mandate.

The debate over trade came at a time of concern over “regional ownership” of the Forum Secretariat, amid perceptions of increased donor influence in the Suva-based office, a trend identified years ago by University of the South Pacific academic Sandra Tarte: “This sense of ownership has been eroded in recent years as economic, political and security initiatives of the Forum seem to be increasingly driven by Australia and New Zealand (who also control the purse strings)” (quoted in Kelsey 2004, 40).

Richard Rowe, Pacific Division head at Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, denied undue influence under the Forum chairmanship of Kevin Rudd: “I think the assertion that the Forum Secretariat is Australian-dominated or that there is an intent to make it so are totally without foundation. The Forum recruits through open merit based processes and in fact there are five Australians employed out of a total staff of just a little over 100 in the Forum Secretariat at the present time” (Rowe 2009).

However, critics were not assuaged, given that citizens of Australia and New Zealand do not take upsecretarial posts, but rather hold senior positions heading key policy units. In September, New Zealander Su’a Kevin Thomsen was appointed as director of the newly created Strategic Partnerships and Coordination Program, and Australian Tanya Chakriya Bowman replaced Roman Gryenberg as the director of the Economic Governance Program. Thomsen was formerly director of policy and communications in the NZ Ministry of Pacific Islands Affairs, while Bowman was trade adviser with AusAID’s Pacific Group from 2007 to 2009. An Islands Business editorial questioned proposals to promote Australian Ed Vrkic from
head of the Pacific Plan office into a new position as chief of staff to the secretary-general (Taga 2009, 5).

Fiji’s interim administration, excluded from the Pacer-Plus negotiations after its suspension from the Forum, sent a signal to the Forum Secretariat by refusing Chakriya Bowman the normal exemption from work-permit requirement issued to all Suva-based staff of CRP and UN agencies. Ms Bowman was forced to work from outside Fiji while the issue played out in negotiations between the interim government and Forum leaders (Grynberg 2010, 29). Fiji will host the 2010 MSG meeting, so the politics of trade and aid will continue to affect regional relations.

Beyond the two largest Forum members, Island nations continued to develop a range of bilateral and regional aid and trade links with players old and new—colonial powers like the United States and France, major aid donors like Japan and the European Union, but also new actors such as Iran and Cuba, which have launched small but high-profile initiatives in the region.

In May, Japan hosted the Fifth Pacific Leaders Meeting (PALM5) in Hokkaido, to discuss trade, fisheries, and climate change. Japan pledged 50 billion yen (US$550 million) aid over the next three years, and the new Kizuna plan for people-to-people exchange (PALM 2009). Visiting leaders officially opened the new location for Tokyo’s Pacific Island Centre—a regional trade and investment office.

France followed in July with the third France-Oceania summit in Noumea, New Caledonia. Former President Jacques Chirac hosted the first two summits in 2003 and 2006 to improve regional relations after the end of nuclear testing and the 1998 Noumea Accord, but the 2009 meeting was not successful. The third summit went ahead on 31 July, but the one thing missing was the host: French President Nicolas Sarkozy reneged on a promised visit to New Caledonia and Australia. Attempts to organize French Prime Minister François Fillon to travel to the South Pacific also failed.

It was just days before the summit that a formal announcement revealed Foreign Affairs Minister Bernard Kouchner would represent the French president. In the end, Kouchner only made a thirty-six-hour flying visit to Noumea, and the working session of the summit at the SPC headquarters in Anse Vata amounted to just a few hours. Only five Forum member countries were represented at the summit by their president or prime minister; other Island nations sent ministers or were only represented at the officials’ level.

Roch Wamytan, head of the FLNKS group within the Congress of New Caledonia, described the summit as a “flop” and announced that his party was boycotting the gathering: “This summit is a provocation. Within the framework of decolonization currently underway in New Caledonia, the role of foreign affairs is supposed to be transferred to our country, but France is acting as if it wants to keep that responsibility for all time” (Maclellan 2009b, 15).

At the same time, New Caledonia and French Polynesia are seeking to expand their role in regional organizations, lobbying in Cairns for full
rather than associate membership in the Forum.

Even though the European Union is playing an increasing role in the region, it again failed to finalize negotiations for an Economic Partnership Agreement in the Pacific, which was supposed to have been completed in 2007. Facing the loss of sugar and tuna markets, Fiji and Papua New Guinea initialed interim agreements with the European Union in 2007, with Papua New Guinea formally signing the interim deal in August 2009, but other countries have yet to finalize a regional partnership agreement.

From 2008 to 2013, the European Union has allocated €95 million euros for the Pacific under the 10th European Development Fund (EDF), including €45 million for Regional Economic Integration and €40 million for Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and the Environment. (One euro is equivalent to approximately US$1.36). However, with European corporations facing off with their Australian and NZ competitors, the European Union refused Forum Secretariat proposals that EDF money be used to fund the Office of Chief Trade Advisor for the PACER-Plus negotiations.

Cold War paranoia about Cuba and Libya as Russian proxies in the Pacific lost force after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, there has been increased diplomatic contact with Cuba and Middle East nations on issues such as development, decolonization, and climate change through the Alliance of Small Islands States (AOSIS) and the United Nations.

After establishing diplomatic links with Vanuatu in 1983 (due to common membership of the Non-Aligned Movement), Cuba has improved relations with other Island nations in recent years. Regional ties to Cuba increased in 2009, following a September 2008 Cuba-Pacific summit in Havana attended by Kiribati President Anote Tong, Tuvalu Prime Minister Apisai Ielemia, and other Pacific foreign ministers and officials. Cuba currently supplies medical staff to Kiribati, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, Nauru, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea, while students from these countries study medicine and primary health care in Havana. In early 2009, Cuba established formal diplomatic relations with Fiji, Tonga, and Sāmoa.

In November 2009, Australian-owned ANZ bank in Honiara blocked the transfer of A$100,000 aid from Iran to the Solomon Islands government, after Tehran offered financial aid for a further twenty Solomon Islands students to study in Cuba.

An ANZ spokesperson denied that the Australia government had requested the action, stating that the bank will not undertake remittances or transactions involving Iran as part of international economic and trade sanctions. The money was subsequently transferred directly between Iranian and Solomon Islands diplomats in Canberra.

This aid reflected improved relations between Iran and Solomon Islands. In 2008, Solomon Islands Foreign Minister William Haomae met his Iranian counterpart, Manouchehr Mottaki, in New York to discuss formalizing diplomatic relations. Haomae then led a Solomons delegation to Tehran, and the two countries signed a cooperative memorandum...
to explore development cooperation agreements.

Israeli officials traveled to Honiara in 2009 to lobby the Sikua government over perceived policy shifts on Middle East affairs. In November, Solomon Islands was the only Pacific Island nation to vote in the UN General Assembly in support of a resolution calling for independent investigation of allegations of war crimes documented in the Goldstone report (a study by a leading South African jurist that criticized human rights violations by Israel and Hamas during the Israeli invasion of Gaza in early 2009). Australia, Nauru, and the US Compact states all voted to reject the report, with other Forum members abstaining.

The Solomon Islands government rejected criticism from Israel over alleged Iranian influence, with an official stating: “We have no enemies, and therefore, we will be friends to all the nations, including both Israel and Iran” (Yedioth Ahronoth 2009).

Meanwhile, Russia continues to have small but influential ties in the region, with proposals for investment in PNG’s Liquid Natural Gas industry and the provision of a reported US$50 million in humanitarian aid to Nauru. In 2009 Nauru was one of only four UN member states to recognize two breakaway regions of Georgia as the states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

China and Taiwan continue to provide aid to Pacific Island nations, with their ongoing diplomatic tensions lessened by the 2008 election of Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou. In July 2009, Taiwan (Republic of China, or ROC) provided US$57,393 for Taiwan/ROC-PIF Scholarships and a total of US$406,000 for CROP projects for 2008/2009. In 2008, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) provided US$194 million in loans and grants to the Pacific (Hanson 2009, 3) and continued its aid in 2009 with US$850,000 for regional programs, including preparations for Pacific involvement in the World Expo to be held in Shanghai in 2010. In September, China also awarded scholarships through the Forum to nine students from Sāmoa, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands, under the China–Pacific Islands Forum Scholarship Scheme.

Government ties with China and Taiwan have not stopped ongoing community concerns over Chinese labor mobility in the region, with accusations of illegal immigration and corruption of officials. Proposals to bring six Uighur prisoners to Palau from the US detention center at Guantánamo Bay also caused debate about China-Oceania relations.

Anti-Chinese arson and looting in Honiara and Nuku‘alofa in 2006 were repeated in 2009 clashes in Papua New Guinea. In May, brawls between PNG and Chinese workers at the Ramu nickel refinery in Madang (run by the Chinese state-owned corporation Metallurgical Construction Corporation) escalated into rioting around the country. Chinese and Malaysian small businesses were attacked, looted, or burned in Port Moresby, Lae, and major towns in the PNG Highlands, with at least four deaths and many injuries. The PNG government established a public commission of inquiry into the riots, under Member of Parliament Jamie Maxtone-Graham.

In Solomon Islands, the government
tabled the report of an inquiry into the 2006 riots in Honiara. RAMSI continued its operations, after a review conducted by the Solomon Islands Parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee, and continued to have a significant input to government policy, with the Sikua government agreeing to allow RAMSI officials to brief the cabinet on a regular basis. Honiara also saw the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, launched by South Africa’s Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu in April 2009.

RAMSI was embarrassed by the acquittal of former Solomon Islands Attorney General Julian Moti in a Cairns court in December 2009. Moti, a Fiji-born Australian citizen, was at the center of tensions between the Australian and Solomon Islands governments in 2006–2007. After he was arrested by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) in Solomon Islands, Moti was extradited to Australia on old child-sex charges. But in December 2009, an Australian court threw out the charges against Moti after finding “an abuse of process” in the prosecution case.

Justice Debbie Mullins criticized AFP conduct, saying this “raises questions about the integrity of the administration of the Australian justice system.” The AFP’s payment of A$150,000 (US$135,000) living expenses to the alleged victim and her family was “an affront to the public conscience” and “the payments by the AFP to the witnesses who live in Vanuatu bring the administration of justice into disrepute to such an extent that [Mr Moti] must succeed on his claim of abuse of process on that basis” (Marriner 2009).

The crop agencies and key donors are allocating resources toward the prevention and management of natural disasters and human induced-catastrophes, drawing away resources from long-term development programs.

In January 2009, the worst flooding in Fiji’s recent history affected over 150,000 people in the Western and Central divisions and caused major damage to infrastructure and crops. The aftermath of the floods highlights the economic and social effects that extreme weather events and disasters have on Island nations and humanitarian aid budgets.

Using economic cost analysis and field survey data, an International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) report conducted by Fijian researchers found major impacts on poverty after the floods: 77 percent of flood-affected sugarcane families will fall below Fiji’s poverty line, and about 42 percent of flood-affected farms are expected to struggle to provide even their families’ basic food needs (Lal, Rita, and Khatri 2009, 25). The report calculates damage to the Fiji sugar industry amounting to an estimated F$24 million, with additional humanitarian costs of F$5 million. (One Fiji dollar is equivalent to approximately US$0.51.)

After an undersea earthquake, a tsunami hit three Polynesian nations in September. In some areas, waves reached 700 meters inland from the shoreline, reaching a height of 14 meters above mean sea level in Sāmoa and 10 meters in American Sāmoa. The death toll was 148 on Sāmoa, 34 in American Sāmoa, and 9 in Tonga, though community-based disaster
prevention training after previous disasters saved many lives.

Island nations also faced major maritime tragedies, including the sinking of an interisland ferry between Tarawa and Maiana in Kiribati on 13 July, with the loss of thirty-three lives. The sinking of the mv *Princess Ashika* in Tonga on 5 August, with seventy-four dead and missing, led to a Royal Commission on the vessel’s safety.

The central threat to human security in the region remains the long-term challenge of mitigating climate change and the cost of adapting to the adverse effects on food security, water supply, coastal management, and economic development.

On 3 June 2009, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution initiated by Pacific diplomats on “Climate Change and Its Possible Security Implications.” This was the first time Pacific countries had joined together to submit a resolution to the General Assembly. The resolution calls on UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon to prepare a report for the assembly on the possible security implications of climate change and for UN agencies to investigate the issue. While the resolution is largely symbolic, it adds weight to the aosis calls for tougher action on global warming.

Pacific governments and community organizations mobilized across the region in December 2009 for the 15th Conference of Parties (COP15) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Government delegates from the Pacific were joined in Copenhagen by Pacific Regional Environmental Programme (SPREP) officials and nongovernment activists from around the region, who launched a range of public events to raise the profile of vulnerable Island states, hoping COP15 would develop a new legally binding agreement on climate change.

But obtaining stronger action in Copenhagen was always going to be difficult. The US Senate is reluctant to pass climate legislation without verifiable commitments from China and India. Beijing and other developing nations demanded action first by developed countries to address their historic responsibility for emissions. Researchers have calculated the proportion of global cumulative emissions from 1850 to 2005 at 29.25 percent for the United States, 26.91 percent for the European Union, but only 8.05 percent for China and 2.32 percent for India (UNFCCC 2009).

In Copenhagen, Pacific youth delegates spoke to the media and lobbied government officials about their fears of global inaction and their hopes for the future. Indigenous activists from Sāmoa, Kanaky, and Hawai‘i campaigned on issues of deforestation and indigenous rights and joined other indigenous leaders at the head of a 100,000-strong march to the conference center. A delegation from the Pacific Conference of Churches met other ecumenical partners in worship as church bells rang out around the world, starting in the Pacific and then throughout North America and Europe, to call for government action at the summit (Maclellan 2010).

By the time they adopted the Pacific Leaders’ Call to Action on Climate Change at the August Forum leaders meeting, Island leaders had dropped some of the previous negotiating
positions advocated as members of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), which links Island nations in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific, Indian, and Atlantic oceans. However, they soon reaffirmed their commitment to AOSIS policy at a September meeting in New York, calling for much stronger action to keep temperature increases well below 1.5 degrees Celsius and a limit of 350ppm of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (in contrast, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand supported 2 degrees and 450ppm).

In Copenhagen, this tougher target for emissions reductions won support from 112 nations, including the members of AOSIS and the Least Developed Countries (LDC) grouping, some African and Latin American nations, and other developing countries such as Egypt, Malaysia, and Pakistan.

Early in the conference, Tuvalu gained international headlines after chief negotiator Ian Fry called for consideration of a proposal on strengthening and extending commitments by developed countries that have signed the Kyoto Protocol, but also long-term cooperative action by all countries, especially rapidly industrializing nations like China, India, and Brazil, and countries like the United States that have not ratified the Kyoto agreement.

Tuvalu’s strong stand won support from many official delegations and community organizations. But in spite of increased international attention to the threat to low-lying atoll nations, Pacific delegates came away angry and disappointed as the meeting foundered without an agreement on a new legally binding treaty.

In the dying hours of the two-week conference, US President Barack Obama joined leaders from China, India, Brazil, and South Africa to cobble together a three-page political statement dubbed the “Copenhagen Accord.” The accord is not a legally binding treaty to promote long-term action to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and fails to set targets for greenhouse-gas reductions by 2020. Seven nations, including Tuvalu, formally stated that they could not accept the deal, and the final plenary of the conference failed to fully endorse the accord, simply stating: “The conference of the parties takes note of the Copenhagen Accord.”

In the last days of the conference, Island leaders reported that there was again pressure on Pacific states to abandon their strong targets. In a press conference on 17 December, Tuvalu Prime Minister Apisai Ielemia stated: “There are some countries like Australia who have been trying to arrange a meeting with us to probably water down our position on 1.5 degrees Celsius. I heard from other small islands that Australia was trying to tell them if they agree to the 2 degrees limit, money would be on the table for adaptation process. That’s their choice to accept the money and back down. But Tuvalu will not” (Maclellan 2010, 25).

Through the Pacific Conference of Churches (Tevi 2009), Pacific churches have highlighted the need to debate the issue of relocation and resettlement. In August 2009, the outgoing chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, Niue Premier Toke Talagi, said it may be time for
the regional organization to formally consider the issue of resettlement of people affected by climate change. Speaking at the official opening of the 2009 Forum leaders meeting in Cairns, Talagi stated: “While all of us are affected, the situation for small island states is quite worrisome. For them, choices such as resettlement must be considered seriously and I wonder whether the Forum is ready to commence formal discussion on the matter” (Macellan 2009a).

Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s key climate adviser, Ross Garnaut, agreed that it is now inevitable that climate change will displace some Pacific island populations: “The South Pacific countries will end up having their populations relocated to Australia or New Zealand and the rest of the world expects that. In the end, we’re likely to accommodate them, so there’s a solution there” (Garnaut 2009). The issue will remain high on the regional agenda.

NIC MACLELLAN

References


Talagi, Toke. 2009. Statement by Forum Chair on suspension of the Fiji military regime from the Pacific Islands Forum, 2 May.

