

New Zealand and the Pacific Region: Challenges and Opportunities*

Phil Goff

Vice Chancellor Siwatibau, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for the invitation to address you here today.

It is very appropriate that this University is the venue for my speech tonight. USP, as the premier institution for higher education in the region, has a key role to play in developing the future leaders of the South Pacific. New Zealand is committed to its partnership with USP. I congratulate the current Vice Chancellor for his vision of the role USP can play in not only in educational fields but also in promoting the principles of good governance. The practice of good governance is essential for the future stability and prosperity of the region.

Each year we bring a delegation of New Zealanders through the Pacific. Our goal is to provide an opportunity for Members of Parliament, academics, Non Government Organisations, business people and officials to get to know the region and its peoples better. On this trip we have been to Papua New Guinea, paid a brief visit to Honiara, and now we are here at the hub of the region in Fiji – the crossroads between Melanesia and Polynesia.

New Zealand is a Pacific nation. Maori came to New Zealand from Awaikii across the Pacific. Our ties to the region are deep and long standing. We have links in many spheres – historical, educational, cultural, trade, economic, political, development and sporting connections, and many personal links through inter-marriage and through New Zealanders living and working all over the Pacific. Today 6.5% of New Zealand's population comes from the Pacific. Six out of every 10 New Zealanders of Pacific ethnicity were born in New Zealand.

We have special relations with the Cook Islands and Niue – which are self-governing countries in free association with NZ –

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and with Tokelau, our sole remaining territory, with whom we are discussing their future, which will be decided by an act of self-determination. We have special ties too with Samoa – a Treaty of Friendship and a special immigration quota.

Our links with Fiji are close and longstanding. Between 40,000 and 50,000 New Zealanders have Fijian ethnicity – Indigenous and Indo-Fijian. New Zealanders have come to work and make their home in Fiji. Fiji is also one of the most popular holiday destinations for New Zealanders. We have served alongside each other in UN peacekeeping operations such as the Sinai and East Timor.

We do business together.

Lastly but certainly not least, we have come absolutely to rely on the speed and skill of Fiji rugby players in the Super 12, with no fewer than eight brilliant Fijian players in our sides. More modestly we contribute back to Fiji our coaching skills.

New Zealand has long regarded Fiji as a pivotal player and a role model for development and leadership in the Pacific. Perhaps it was that which intensified our sense of concern and disappointment when the rule of law and democracy were once again overthrown by extremists in May 2000. New Zealand took a strong stand against the subversion of the Fijian constitution at that time, not simply because it was contrary to New Zealand's values, which it was, but because it breached the values and standards which the international community has set for itself. It breached the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political rights, the Commonwealth Harare declaration and the Pacific Forum's values subsequently declared in the Biketawa Declaration.

We welcomed the restoration of democracy in Fiji and look forward to the resolution of the final outstanding constitutional issue, the composition of Cabinet, by the Supreme Court in the very near future.

New Zealand and Fiji share many common values, working together on issues such as climate change, disarmament, protection of Pacific Fisheries, and respect for multilateral processes. With the issues surrounding the coup finally disposed of; New Zealand looks forward to full co-operation and engagement with Fiji.

A key issue in the international arena for both of our countries is terrorism and transnational crime.

The events of September 11th and the Bali bombings changed the world. We face a new and more precarious security environment in the Pacific region. Previous challenges and crises have developed within the region as groups have struggled to live alongside one another. Threats today also come from outside the region

through transnational crime, people and drug smuggling and international terrorism.

It is now essential for Pacific Island countries to put in place counter-terrorist and law enforcement legislation. Implementing the raft of new measures places pressures on small island administrations which have many competing priorities. While the Pacific seems an unlikely target for terrorist action, as pressure increases elsewhere, terrorist and criminal organisations will look for weak links in the chain - a reputation our region cannot afford to gain.

Pacific Island leaders underlined their support for the international counter-terrorism effort in their endorsement of the Nasonini Declaration on regional security at the Forum in Fiji last August. This declaration has two aspects: it reiterates the regional commitment to putting in place law enforcement legislation, and recognises commitments under United Nations Security Council resolution 1373 and the Financial Action Task Force special recommendations on terrorist financing. In view of the nature of the threats that now exist, there is a need to make improvements to border security - immigration and customs procedures, improving information gathering and sharing, and tightening up legislation on financial crime. New Zealand, in cooperation with Australia and the US, is working actively to assist Pacific Island states across this wide range of concerns.

Another major and longstanding challenge is disaster management. Cyclones are an annual event and even the most prepared of states cannot prevent the devastation that follows - as Fiji found so tragically with Cyclone Ami. Outlying islands can lose communications, and establishing if they need help, and delivering it if they do, can be a difficult task. New Zealand has always stood ready to send help quickly to assist our neighbours in assessing damage and beginning reconstruction. We have recently improved our disaster response communication and coordination with Australia and France. Our response needs to be swift, effective and meet the needs of those affected.

A further key challenge for the region is the conservation and sustainable management of the Pacific tuna fishery. Fish are a critical economic resource for the Pacific region, as well as a key food source.

ADB figures show the Pacific region is now the most important tuna fishing area of the world, supplying a third of world tuna production. The value of the fishery is estimated at around US\$2 billion. But Pacific Island States only receive a small proportion, 10% of that value, with most of it leaving the region. For many Pacific States, getting a better economic return from the fish caught in

their waters will be an important step towards improved economic security.

Working with the Forum Fisheries Agency, New Zealand is playing an active role in the preparatory conferences to put in place the Commission which will be needed once the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Convention enters into force. Those talks are chaired by a New Zealander, Michael Powles. Fiji has also taken a leading role in that process, being among the five states that have already ratified the Convention.

Through the network of the Forum organisations the Pacific region is better served than many other regions of the world when it comes to international negotiations. The collective voice of the region – 14 members of the United Nations – is heard clearly in international forums from the UN General Assembly to negotiations on climate change, on the preservation of biodiversity and on other issues such as the importance of indigenous rights and intellectual property rights.

New Zealand has sought to assist our Pacific neighbors across a range of these areas - security, disaster management and relief, natural resource utilization, the strengthening of the Forum family of institutions - and in other areas too such as good governance education, health, building trade capacity, developing eco tourism and so on.

One of the principal avenues for cooperation has been through Official Development Assistance (ODA). Last July we set up the New Zealand Agency for International development – NZAID – to give greater focus and increase the effectiveness of our ODA programs. NZAID has a central focus on direct and indirect ways of helping to eliminate poverty and a core focus on the Pacific region.

Early European explorers in the region reported back that they had found paradise in the Pacific. In many respects the Pacific is a place blessed by its beauty and climate. But the meaning of the word Pacific belies some underlying tensions and problems that cannot be ignored. These include ethnic tensions, land issues, disparities in economic development and corruption and failures of governance. All constitute threats to security and stability in the region. Some of these factors are in evidence in a number of Pacific countries and a number of them are evident in a few of our fellow Pacific States. But even in the midst of struggles there is light as well as dark.

The conflict in Bougainville was one of the darkest chapters in Pacific history but after five years of peacekeeping and negotiations the peace process is firmly established. The collection of weapons should soon reach the point at which the UN Ambassador on Bougainville can declare that the ex-combatants have sub-

stantially complied with the terms of the Bougainville Peace Agreement and Stage II of weapons collection is complete. That declaration will open the door to consultations on a constitution for Bougainville and preparations for the election of an autonomous Bougainville government.

All of us today must however be concerned at the plight of the government and people of Solomon Islands. Despite the efforts of the former International Peace Monitoring Team and the ongoing efforts of the indigenous National Peace Council and other civil society organisations, law and order and personal security – particularly on Guadalcanal and Malaita – are precarious. The situation sank to a low ebb a few weeks ago with the cold-blooded assassination of former Police Commissioner Sir Fred Soaki by a police officer.

The rule of the gun operates in Solomon Islands at present. The Government cannot rely on the police for protection and is subject to intimidation and extortion. Leadership for change must come from within the Solomons itself, but friends and neighbours must play a role encouraging and facilitating the changes needed to draw it back from the brink of financial and political collapse.

In closing I want to return to the question of how New Zealand can further engage with the region. Last year Mike Powles put forward a proposal for the establishment of a Pacific Foundation in New Zealand, an idea also promoted in the Labour Party's 2002 election manifesto. I'm pleased to announce today that a Pacific Cooperation Foundation has been established with government funding initially of \$675,000 a year. The purpose of the Foundation is to increase cooperation between New Zealand and our Pacific neighbours through media, cultural and public affairs programmes, through projects that would benefit New Zealand and Pacific Island businesses, through academic excellence in Pacific issues and through an exchange of views and information about Pacific and New Zealand issues.

The foundation, we hope, will become a centre for information and a forum for the exchange of views about issues affecting New Zealand and the Pacific. It will promote and assist activities that increase mutual understanding and constructive linkages between New Zealanders and Pacific people.

Those goals neatly encapsulate New Zealand's wider aspirations with regard to our region.

We are here today on the campus of the University of the South Pacific. New Zealand has supported USP from its beginnings in the 1960s and we will continue to do so. Indeed, my colleague

Marian Hobbs has today met with Vice Chancellor Siwatibau to discuss how we can make our support more sustainable and strategic. I congratulate you, Siwa, on your leadership of this university and on your determination to ensure its relevance to the challenges facing the modern Pacific, including in establishing the important new Institute for Development and Governance.

Thank you for participating in this occasion this evening. I look forward to your questions and comments.

Hon Phil Goff is Minister of Foreign Affairs, Government of New Zealand.