

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515**

**STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE ENI F.H. FALEOMAVAEGA
CHAIRMAN**

**before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC, AND THE
GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT**

“Ushering in Change: A New Era for U.S. Regional Policy in the Pacific”

July 29, 2009

We need a coherent regional policy toward the Pacific. Our over-reliance on Australia and New Zealand is providing increasingly counterproductive to our interests, especially as resentment toward Canberra and Wellington has grown over the years. Moreover, given that China and Iran are actively engaged in the region, the United States can no longer afford to abdicate its responsibilities, nor should we, considering that the region encompasses sea lanes at the heart of trans-Pacific trade and exclusive economic zones containing vast resources. Most Pacific Island nations also have democratically-elected governments, cast twelve votes in the UN General Assembly, and are among our strongest allies.

In my view, American policy toward the Pacific Island region must begin with more active, direct and sustained engagement with the countries of the region. We need to make clear that the United States considers the Pacific Island nations important enough that we will chart our own course rather than outsource policymaking to Australia and New Zealand.

Toward that end, the Administration should increase USAID’s presence in the region. In 1994, USAID closed its facilities in the South Pacific, citing budget constraints and shifting strategic priorities. However, at the time, the United States was only spending \$12 million annually in the Pacific Island countries. Given an anticipated increase in U.S. resources for the conduct of our foreign policy, I am hopeful that funds will be committed to reestablish USAID presence in the Pacific Island nations.

A relatively small commitment of funds would go a long way toward signaling American intentions to reengage the region. Such a commitment would also allow the implementation of country-level and regional projects that meet U.S. developmental

goals of fostering sustainable economic growth, strengthening democratic institutions, and addressing the challenges of climate change.

In terms of providing other resources to the region, I believe we should increase the presence of Peace Corps volunteers, offer more Fulbright scholarships and increase funding for the U.S.-South Pacific Scholarship Program run under the auspices of the East West Center. In addition, the Administration should actively encourage the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to enhance their programs in the region.

Beyond committing greater resources, the United States should demonstrate its interest in Pacific Island nations through the direct involvement of senior-level officials on important occasions. I would encourage an early visit to the Pacific Island nations by the next Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. I would also hope that in the next Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders summit (PICL), which will include the United States, Washington will commit to high-level participation by and recognition from the region and meets only once every three years. At the last meeting, the Pacific leaders were largely ignored by the Bush Administration – a ten-minute speech by Secretary Rice was the extent of that Administration's senior-level involvement.

Moreover, the State Department should consider increasing the number of participants in its International Visitor Leadership Program and other exchanges that permit leaders of the Pacific Island nations to interact with their American counterparts. In particular, I would urge a focus on exchanges demonstrating the depth of the Administration's commitment to dealing with global warming. The Pacific Island nations are among those most vulnerable to sea-level rise, coral depletion and the severe weather patterns that are occurring as a result of climate change. Indeed, Tuvalu, with only nine atolls a few feet above sea level, may soon be submerged, necessitating the relocation of its entire population. The same fate awaits many other low-lying atolls across the region.

Complementing environmental efforts aimed at addressing the problems associated with global warming, I believe the Administration should increase support for the study of marine biology and other marine sciences, in partnership with the Pacific Island nations. Further, the Administration should take steps to submit the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme Agreement (SPREP) and associated protocols to the Senate for ratification.

I would also like to work with the Administration to promote trade and investment in the region. The United States provided ample assistance to post-war Germany and Japan, and we have invested billions to rebuild Iraq. Yet, the United States seems unable to clean up its nuclear mess in the Pacific, or make a concerted effort at working with Pacific Island and American business interests to diversify the region's economy. Under the Obama Administration, I hope this will change.

Finally, I am hopeful that the Obama Administration will reassess the U.S. position on signing the South Pacific Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Rarotonga), an issue of longstanding importance to the leaders and people of the region.

Now, I recognize our Ranking Member for any statement he may have, and I especially welcome Ambassador Marlene Moses, Chair of the Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Permanent Representative of the Republic of Nauru to the United Nations. Her testimony before the Subcommittee is historic.