



Government of the Cook Islands
Te Kauono Tutara e te Mana Tiaki - Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Immigration

UNITED STATE OF AMERICA – PACIFIC ISLAND LEADERS MEETING

Friday 11th February 2022, 6.00pm – 7.30pm (CKT)
Virtual

**Remarks for the
HONOURABLE Tingika Elikana, Associate Minister of Foreign Affairs and
Immigration**

Co-hosts -

**US Secretary of State, His Excellency Antony Blinken; and
Attorney General of Fiji, Honourable Ayaz Sayed Khaiyum
Leaders,
Fellow Ministers and Colleagues,**

Welcome

US Secretary of State;
Attorney General of Fiji;
Pacific Islands Forum Leaders; and
Colleagues
Kia Orana.

May I thank the United States and Fiji for convening this timely Dialogue.

The Cook Islands consider the PIF relationship with the United States a meaningful and enduring one.

A decade ago, we were proud hosts of the Pacific Islands Forum Meeting attended by the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. I recall the warm embrace and joint articulation by the

Pacific and the United States of shared aspirations for deeper engagement and an expanded cooperation agenda.

However, with the benefit of hindsight, I would suggest we've collectively fallen short in delivering on those shared aspirations.

I consider our Dialogue today an important opportunity to refresh a shared forward cooperation agenda that will support the recovery of our Blue Pacific and in turn the people we collectively serve.

Allow me to put forward 3 suggestions for our forward Pacific-United States cooperation which would support a secure and resilient Blue Pacific.

First, a large-scale multi-year recovery package for the Pacific focused on productive public investment and financed by the Pacific's development partners.

The scale of economic devastation caused by COVID-19 place the Pacific at real risk of a 'lost decade' of development. Our Pacific Governments are unable to finance the scale of government investment needed to stem the economic hemorrhaging.

While the best solution would be increased grants from development partners, given the domestic crisis confronting all donor countries, appropriately structured loans are a feasible second-best option.

Australia's Lowy Institute in its paper "Avoiding a Pacific Lost Decade" put forward three loan options for an effective recovery package for the Pacific. First, Multilateral Development Banks could expand their lending programs. Second, other existing creditors could provide debt relief in the form of debt for recovery swaps. Third, bilateral donors could expand their own lending programs.

Second, the Cook Islands see scope for an expanded oceans cooperation agenda between the United States and the Pacific.

The unique multilateral Fisheries Treaty between the United States and the Pacific is a cornerstone of our relationship with the United States and we're proud of our history of close cooperation with the United States in fisheries monitoring, control, surveillance and enforcement activities. The Cook Islands commit to further cooperation with the United States in fisheries and maritime surveillance operations in the forward years at bilateral level and within regional/multilateral fora like the Forum Fisheries Agency and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission.

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has been instrumental in the Cook Islands pursuit of sustainable development and management of its oceans resources over a number of decades. Just this week our government have recommended the granting of seabed minerals exploration licenses to three applicants two of which are companies from the United States.

This is a significant milestone in the development of our sustainable oceans economy and contribution to powering the global renewable energy revolution.

We look forward to working closely with the United States within the UNCLOS framework and across the full spectrum of oceans issues in the years ahead.

My third suggestion is for the formalization of a high level dialogue mechanism between the United States and the Pacific.

While today's Dialogue is welcomed, the adhoc manner in which this has convened limits the returns for all of us. If we are to reap the fruits of elevated cooperation, such efforts require political leadership.

The Japan Pacific PALM mechanism, involving 3 yearly Leader level engagements between Japan and the 18 Pacific Islands Forum member countries has been invaluable in supporting the separate and shared development aspirations of the Pacific and Japan. PALM has seen both Japan and the Pacific bring to fruition sustained development benefits for over two decades that is only possible with genuine engagement, shared ambitions and political leadership.

The United States has been a formal Dialogue Partner of the Pacific Islands Forum for over three decades and the formalization of a high level dialogue mechanism between the US and the PIF would provide an elevated platform for concerted effort and co-operation in these unprecedented times.

Co-chair's – may I again commend your respective governments for this valuable opportunity to share the views of the Cook Islands. COVID-19 has afforded an invaluable opportunity for hope, partnership and a rejuvenated approach. The unprecedented challenges in front of require our collective commitment to cooperation and sustained political engagement if we are to secure the future of our Blue Pacific.

Thank you.