

A failure to deal with Fiji blots regional forum's copybook

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The 40th meeting of Pacific Islands Forum leaders in Cairns this week is the most significant international forum Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has hosted at home since taking office.

This is the only region that Australia — which is giving more than \$1 billion of development assistance this year — can reasonably claim to lead. Australia's two-way trade with the island countries of the Pacific Islands Forum (excluding New Zealand) totalled about \$5.4 billion in 2008. Last year Rudd announced a new era in Australia's relationships with its Pacific neighbours, based on mutual respect and responsibility and aimed at raising living standards in the region.

Australia assumes the chair of the forum this week, which gives Canberra the formal right to guide the region's agenda for the next year. It will also be under pressure to maintain the unity and viability of the regional group as it struggles to weather the storm of last year's food and fuel price surges, the impact of the global economic crisis, the negative effects of climate change and the problem of Fiji.

Climate change is the biggest issue on the regional agenda. Sea level rise is a very real threat for the 50 per cent of Pacific Islanders who live within 1.5 kilometres of the coastline.

The forum has called for substantial cuts to greenhouse gas emissions as the viability of island communities is threatened by inundation from sea level rise and water and food security problems caused by weather pattern changes.

Rudd has promised to provide support for practical adaptation measures, to incorporate climate change into development partnerships and to represent the concerns of Pacific Island countries about climate change in international meetings. In addition to the \$150 million already allocated for the International Climate Change Adaptation Initiative, a further \$12 million will be provided for the Pacific Adaptation Strategy Assistance Program.

Pacific Island countries have complained of bureaucratic difficulties in getting adaptation funding and say that assistance being directed through international and regional organisations does not reach the districts and communities affected. Australia should help overcome these problems and ensure affected communities can adapt to new circumstances or relocate to more viable locations.

The impact of the global economic crisis has been an emerging challenge for the region. Although subsistence lifestyles have shielded many communities from its harsher effects, the crisis has been keenly felt through lost revenue from a low demand for exports, lower rates of foreign investment and declining remittances from overseas workers.

AusAID's latest Tracking Development and Governance in the Pacific report found that the region as a whole is unlikely to meet the UN's Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

At a Lowy Institute conference on the global economic crisis and the Pacific in Brisbane this week, leaders called for more aid to be delivered through direct budget support so that governments could continue to fund education and health services as their revenue declined. The forum's new compact on aid co-ordination should help improve the effectiveness of aid.

Agreement by leaders to commence negotiations on the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations Plus is a major diplomatic success for Australia.

Australia and New Zealand will need to assure those sceptical of the agreement that it will promote rather than curtail economic growth by helping the private sector in the Pacific overcome invisible barriers to trade, such as quarantine restrictions and poor marketing plans.

For the first time in the history of the forum, Fiji has been excluded from the leaders' meeting. Its shadow has loomed large in Cairns, despite strenuous efforts by the Australian Government to focus on dealing with the impact of the global economic crisis and climate change.

The intransigence of Fiji's military leader, Voreqe Bainimarama, and the associated decline of the Fiji economy threaten the unity of the region and the prosperity of countries dependent on Fiji for trade, transport and education services.

The suspension of Fiji from the councils of the forum earlier this year has failed to encourage its military regime back to democracy. Instead, Commodore Bainimarama has abrogated the constitution, sacked the judiciary, imposed emergency regulations and censorship of the media and most recently arrested senior members of the country's influential Methodist Church. Yet Fiji continues to host the forum's secretariat in Suva and dominates the regional agenda.

Regional leaders have expressed a variety of views on Fiji in recent weeks, ranging from Niue Premier Toke Talagi's calls for the Fijian people to rise up against the military regime to sympathy for Bainimarama's objectives from the Melanesian Spearhead Group leaders. Tongan Prime Minister Feleti Sevele has rightly questioned the value of the forum's tough stance on Fiji as it clearly had not achieved its aim.

For an organisation that can justly be proud of its efforts to bring stability to Solomon Islands in 2003, the difficulties in dealing with Fiji are frustrating.

While the problems in Fiji are genuinely complex, the inability of the Pacific Islands Forum to influence the regime or negotiate a political settlement to date demonstrates its fundamental limitations.

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