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September 29, 2010

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Eni F.H. Faleomavaega
Chairman

The Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Washington, D.C.

**FALEOMAVAEGA CONDUCTS HEARING ON U.S.
POLICY TOWARD PACIFIC ISLANDS ON
ANNIVERSARY OF TSUNAMI**

The Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment, Eni F.H. Faleomavaega, conducted a hearing today on U.S. policy toward the Pacific Islands with senior witnesses from the Departments of State and Defense as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development.

“We held the hearing exactly one year after the devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck American Samoa, Samoa and Tonga. I offered my thanks to the Obama Administration for approving the request that I and Congresswoman Laura Richardson made to airlift 92,000 pounds of emergency supplies collected by Samoan and non-Samoan communities in the Los Angeles, California area as well as by Samoan and Tongan communities in Salt Lake City and St. George, Utah,” Faleomavaega said.

“On broader U.S. policies and actions toward the Pacific Islands, I believe the Administration has taken some significant steps, but as I told the witnesses, after years of neglect, if the United States seeks to play a role in the Pacific commensurate with its interests, we have far more to do. Unfortunately, it became evident that USAID is trying to back away from pledges made by the Administration to open USAID offices in Fiji and Papua New Guinea after an absence from the region of 15 years. The witness from the State Department, Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell, made it clear that his Department believes that the United States needs to live up to its promises. But the witness from USAID, Deputy

Administrator Frank Young, talked about a three-month study with final decisions to follow.”

“All of the Pacific Island nations and all of us in Congress had been led to believe that the Administration reached a final decision months ago to open offices in Suva and Port Moresby and to follow through in implementing a robust set of assistance programs. I find USAID’s new resistance to that previously-announced decision more than deeply disappointing. It is unacceptable. And I will do everything I can to see that the State Department prevails in its views and the Administration lives up to its promises,” Faleomavaega said.

The full text of the Faleomavaega’s opening statement at the hearing follows:

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

STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE ENI F.H. FALEOMAVAEGA
CHAIRMAN
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC AND THE
GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

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

“Renewed Engagement: U.S. Policy toward Pacific Island Nations”

September 29, 2010

On September 29, one year ago today, American Samoa was hit by the most powerful earthquake of 2009, which struck below the ocean about 140 miles southwest of Pago Pago, American Samoa, and 125 miles south of Samoa.

The earthquake, which registered 8.3 on the Richter scale, set off a massive tsunami that crashed into American Samoa, Samoa and Tonga, sweeping cars and people out to sea as survivors fled to high ground. In American Samoa, many children running for home unknowingly ran in the direction of the tsunami.

The neighboring islands of Samoa and Tonga were also deeply affected and, as we pause to remember the lives lost and the families impacted, I want to once more publicly thank President Obama for his leadership during this tragedy.

I also want to thank U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for her unwavering support. At my request and the request of Congresswoman Laura Richardson, Secretary Clinton authorized the immediate airlift of 92,000 pounds of emergency supplies collected by Samoan and non-Samoan communities in the Los Angeles, California area as well as by our Samoan and Tongan communities in Salt Lake City and St. George, Utah.

The Obama Administration continues to stand with us and, on behalf of all Samoans, I thank the

Administration for its swift response.

Based on its statements and actions, the Obama Administration clearly recognizes the rising importance of Asia and the Pacific and has adjusted U.S. policies to reflect emerging realities – including enhanced engagement with the Pacific Island nations integral to the region.

Despite their geographic importance, steadfast friendship with the United States and consistent partnership with us in the United Nations, for too long we effectively outsourced our policymaking toward the Pacific Islands to Australia and New Zealand. Unfortunately, the sometimes imperious attitudes and actions of our friends in Canberra and Wellington toward the Pacific Islands have fostered a degree of resentment and distrust that has limited their influence as well as their ability to represent U.S. views and interests. In Australia's case, moreover, its role may now be further constrained by the recent election of a fragile, single-seat majority, coalition government.

By deferring to the foreign ministries of Canberra and Wellington, we left a vacuum in the Pacific that China has been only too eager to fill. And while China can and should be a force for prosperity, stability and security in the Pacific Islands region and around the globe, Beijing's rapid rise presents a unique set of challenges. It is very much in the interest of the United States to develop a coherent, robust and sustained regional policy toward the Pacific Islands, one that recognizes and, ideally, complements China's rise. It was thus reassuring to hear Secretary Clinton last year, in her first appearance before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, pledge to establish "a more comprehensive approach, American approach" to Pacific Island nations.

In the 17 months since then, the Administration has made tangible progress in meeting that pledge. The Secretary of State just held her second annual meeting with Pacific Island leaders two days ago in New York and I understand it went well. Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and Assistant Secretary of Defense Chip Gregson also led a high-level U.S. delegation to the August Pacific Island Leaders Post-Forum Dialogue in Vanuatu. As of this week, we have a resident Ambassador to Palau for the first time, and at long last, an agreement on the Compact. The Defense Department is continuing its Pacific Partnership program to provide humanitarian and other assistance, which has been extremely successful. And, unless there has been a change – and I will seek clarification on this in my questions – USAID will be reopening offices in Fiji and Papua New Guinea after a 15-year absence.

These are all important steps, and the Administration deserves credit for seeing to it that Secretary Clinton's pledge has already borne fruit. But if we seek to play a role in the Pacific commensurate with our interests, we have far more to do. After so many years of U.S. neglect, Pacific Island nations need and deserve further tangible evidence that the United States is committed to enhancing its engagement with the region for the long term.

Toward that end, I believe that we should institutionalize the Secretary of State's annual New York meeting with Pacific Island leaders. And when the Secretary makes her visit to the Pacific later this year – postponed due to the earthquake in Haiti – I hope she will visit at least two Pacific Island states in addition to Australia and New Zealand.

My invitation to her to stop in American Samoa still stands. Such a visit would support efforts to strengthen U.S.-Pacific Island relations as well as American Samoa's position as an integral member of the region. It would also give the Secretary a chance to thank the thousands of Samoan men and women who serve in the U.S. armed forces and who put their lives on the line every day in the most dangerous parts of the world on behalf of our great nation.

American Samoans, as well as the citizens of Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and those of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Marshall Islands and Palau, make the same sacrifices as all other member of the U.S. military. In fact, they serve our country in uniform at higher per capita rates than U.S. citizens. They also suffer greater number of casualties per

capita. I was able to honor the sacrifice of one of our brave soldiers from FSM when I attended his funeral in Pohnpei.

In other areas, I believe that the United States should institutionalize its participation in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) by creating an Ambassador-level position for the PIF, just as we now have for ASEAN. U.S. participation in the PIF should also include Congress, and I will do my utmost to ensure that my colleagues make the effort to attend.

PIF is particularly important because it provides smaller island states a means of voicing their opinions independent of Australia and New Zealand as the organization carries out its mission of strengthening regional cooperation and integration. Moreover, PIF is more inclusive than the South Pacific Forum, which it replaced in 2000, and currently has 15 members (Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu), two associate members (new Caledonia and French Polynesia), and three observer states (Tokelau, Timor-Leste and Wallis and Futuna).

Meanwhile, we should move quickly to ensure that President Obama's planned participation in the Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders next year in Hawaii takes place. The significance of America's first Pacific President attending that Conference cannot be overstated.

We should also enlarge the International Visitor Leadership Program and other exchanges for Pacific Islanders so they can interact more often with their American counterparts. We should increase the presence of Peace Corps volunteers in the region, offer more Fulbright scholarships to Pacific Islanders and increase funding for the U.S.-South Pacific Scholarship Program run under the auspices of the East West Center.

The U.S. Navy's Pacific Partnership, which has been so successful, should be annualized and expanded. This past summer, the hospital ship MERCY treated more than 1,000 Palauans; and two summers ago, 15,000 residents of the Federated States of Micronesia received medical attention. I sincerely hope the Defense Department understands the value of this program – and does not make our friends in the region wait again for many years before it resumes.

USAID's return to the region offers a chance to assist crucial country-level and regional projects, including those directed at the extraordinary, and potentially existential, challenges that climate change poses to Pacific Island nations. The Administration should seek to leverage its programs on global warming by complementing ongoing efforts of existing regional organizations such as the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) as well as new programs being developed at the East-West Center with funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The United States should also help strengthen the region's economy through the promotion of bilateral trade and investment, including encouraging the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations negotiations (PACER Plus) to provide maximum economic benefits for Pacific Island nations. And as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) moves forward, I hope that the United States and other countries involved would consider developing links between TPP and PACER Plus. In addition, the Administration should actively encourage the Millennium Challenge Corporation, International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to enhance their programs in the region. For all these organizations, it is critical to remember that a small amount of assistance goes a very long way in the Pacific islands.

On the difficult issue of Fiji, my own view, based on four trips there since the constitutional crisis last year and extended discussions with all sides, is that U.S. engagement is absolutely essential. The

country's problems are multidimensional, resulting from Fiji's unique colonial history; complex ethnic mix of indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians; intra-indigenous Fijian chiefly, provincial and family rivalries; and religious disagreements. Clearly, the Australian and New Zealand policies of sanctioning and isolating Fiji have not only failed but been wholly counterproductive.

Indeed, with the travel bans that the two countries have imposed, their victories in excluding Fiji from key institutions in the region and beyond, and their attempts to end Fiji's vital contributions to U.N. Peacekeeping operations around the world, Fiji has moved ever closer to China. China has been more than willing to step in to provide soft loans, investments and now even peacekeeping training for Fiji's military. At the same time, its tourists are heading to Fiji in ever greater numbers.

I understand that during her meeting with Pacific Island leaders on Monday, Secretary Clinton spoke to Fiji's Foreign about developing a bilateral dialogue. I encourage both sides to move forward expeditiously on such a dialogue. I would also encourage the exploration of new multilateral discussions with Fiji, perhaps through the Melanesian Spearhead Group or another venue in which Pacific Island nations take the lead.

In engaging Fiji, we should recognize that interim Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama has not altered the plans he outlined in his Strategic Framework for Change (SFC) to draft a constitution reflecting the country's culture and history, to enact electoral reforms that will establish equal suffrage, and to hold free, fair and democratic elections by 2014. In fact, he has reaffirmed that position over the past year in public statements at international venues such as the World Bank.

On my last trip to Fiji in August, the Chairman of the Strategic Framework for Change Coordinating Committee personally briefed me on the blueprint for implementing the SPC, and I was impressed. The focus will be on economic and social matters from now through 2012, when constitutional and electoral issues will be taken up, concluding with elections two years later. In my meeting with Prime Minister Bainimarama during the trip, I suggested that Fiji take up constitutional and political issues now, rather than wait two years, and that perhaps the United States could provide informal assistance and expert advice so that by 2012, the country would already have developed some options.

I think we should take interim Prime Minister Bainimarama at his word when he says he wants to end Fiji's coup culture once and for all, and we should offer Suva resources to facilitate the reform of its electoral process, redraft its constitution, ensure successful elections and build strong institutions capable of sustaining democracy and stability.

Again, I do sincerely thank the Administration for moving our policies in the Pacific in the right direction and for providing essential assistance to American Samoa and Samoa after the tsunami. The witnesses here today have helped lay the foundation for progress in U.S. relations with the region. Now is the time to use that foundation to develop a sustained, robust and comprehensive American approach to the Pacific Islands.

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