



Government of the Cook Islands
Te Kauono Tutara e te Mana Tiaki
– **Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration**

Wednesday 8 April 2020, 18:00

Pacific Islands Forum Foreign Ministers agree to establish Pacific Humanitarian Pathway for COVID-19

Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Foreign Ministers met virtually earlier this week, for the first time, to discuss a regional response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual discussions involving the 18 member countries of the PIF were Chaired by Tuvalu Foreign Minister Simon Kofe as current Chair of the PIF. Participants included various Prime Ministers and Presidents, including Cook Islands Prime Minister Henry Puna and a number of Foreign Ministers and Ministers from across the region.



Pacific Leaders had invoked last month the Biketawa Declaration which provides a mechanism to enable a regional response to a crisis. The Biketawa Declaration was previously used for the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) between 2003 and 2017. For insight into RAMSI, see <https://www.forumsec.org/ramsi-regional-spirit-helpem-fren/>

Prime Minister Puna in his intervention remarked “that never before have we used the Biketawa Declaration to respond to an emergency that affects each and every Forum Member in such a profound way and we are fortunate that we are able to step up and come together as a unified region in times of crisis such as this.”

The main item for discussion for the Ministers was the immediate need to identify and address political, legal or policy barriers to the movement of COVID-19 related humanitarian and other assistance to countries in need across the region. In that regard, Ministers agreed to the establishment of the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 (PHP-C).

A statement from the Pacific Islands Forum noted that the PHP-C will endeavour to “expedite assistance and cooperation between member countries in preparing for and responding to COVID-19, by enabling the provision of medical and humanitarian assistance from regional, international and development partners in a timely, safe, effective and equitable manner”, see <https://www.forumsec.org/pacific-islands-forum-foreign-ministers-agree-to-establish-a-pacific-humanitarian-pathway-on-covid-19/>

Prime Minister Puna recognised that the movement of humanitarian resources in the region will be critical in the months ahead and the process by which the PHP-C will deliver assistance would need to align with needs articulated at national level and in a manner that is flexible and respects internal domestic processes.



The Prime Minister also noted “the impact of COVID-19 will remain with us for some time to come. The health ramifications is only the tip of the iceberg as our economies and societies come under sustained pressure. We will endure, recover and assist our neighbours as is the Pacific Way.”

The Ministers agreed to establish a Ministerial action group which would provide some oversight of the Biketawa Declaration process and set up of PHP-C. The PHP-C response would be coordinated by a regional taskforce of PIF Members with support from the Forum Secretariat, the Pacific Community (SPC), relevant CROP regional agencies, the World Health Organisation and other relevant UN agencies, and regional law enforcement and legal agencies.

Cook Islands Government participation in PHP-C will be led by Te Kauono Tutara e te Mana Tiaki – Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration (MFAI) working closely with the Cook Islands National Health Emergency Taskforce (NHET). Foreign Secretary Tapaeru Herrmann noted Cook Islands Government engagement with PHP-C would continue to be informed by national COVID-19 response efforts led by NHET stating “as we continue to work with PIF members and partners to develop the mechanisms that will operationalize the PHP-C, we must ensure the PHP-C complements, strengthens and adds value to existing bilateral arrangements between members and development partners on COVID-19 responses as well as existing regional mechanisms for delivery of assistance”.

Queries regarding this media release and Cook Islands engagement in the PHP-C process can be directed to antonina.browne@cookislands.gov.ck

Picture

Prime Minister Puna participating in discussions with colleague Foreign Ministers via ZOOM from the Office of the Prime Minister, Rarotonga. In attendance, MFAI Acting Director Pacific Division Antonina Browne and Foreign Secretary Tapaeru Herrmann. Also in attendance via ZOOM from Suva, Charge d'affaires of the Cook Islands High Commission to Fiji, Jim Armistead.