

# Pacific Buzz (September 2): Leaders meeting (in Auckland and Nadi) | Manus Island aid questioned | Fiji church conference cancelled | Pacific WikiLeaks



by Ashlee Betteridge

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*A special Development Buzz on the Pacific. With the Pacific Forum next week in Auckland, this Devpolicy buzz highlights Pacific and PNG development happenings and controversies.*

## Pacific Island Leaders Forum

The 2011 Pacific Island Leaders Forum **will be held in Auckland from September 6-9**. Some 20 countries will participate in this 40th anniversary meeting and UN Chief Ban-Ki Moon **will be in attendance**.

There was a **pre-forum session in Suva, Fiji, on August 18**, where issues such as regional security, strategic and financial issues and country initiatives were discussed. The Pacific Plan Action Committee **also met to discuss its progress**. The verdict: achievements in the last two years, especially in fisheries, but, ominously, “major challenges remain.”

Fiji of course is not invited to next week’s event. It was suspended from the Forum in 2009 following its coup. According to former senior Forum bureaucrat **Roman Grynberg**, nothing much will be achieved without Fiji there. Meanwhile, Fiji is **hosting its own event**, Engaging with the Pacific, in Nadi this week. **According to the press**, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga, Timor Leste, Tahiti,

Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru and Tuvalu will all be represented.

In trade news, the Australian Greens [have criticised the federal government's use of "strong arm tactics"](#) in negotiating trade with Pacific Island nations, alleging Canberra is trying to undermine the independence of the Chief Trade Advisor's office. But in this [Devpolicy opinion piece](#), Terence Wood argues free-trade agreements just aren't a big deal for the Pacific. This Pacific Institute of Public Policy's [paper](#) makes the same case for Vanuatu's accession to the WTO.

### **Manus Island and Australian aid**

Questions have been raised this month over an aid and development package that could be tied to the Australian Government's reopening of a detention facility on Manus Island in PNG. The Australian and PNG governments signed a memorandum of understanding on the issue on August 20. Funding details have been scant. The governor of the island, Michael Sapau, [has compiled a list of 28 major infrastructure development projects](#) that he would like to see funded as part of any deal.

Australian Council for International Development executive director Marc Purcell has [labelled the reopening of Manus Island "unethical policy"](#). Views on the ground in PNG have been [mixed](#). Despite this, crews have [already arrived](#) on the island to begin planning work for a new centre.

Meanwhile, in Australia, views are divided as to whether the recent High Court decision sinking the "Malaysia Solution" makes a return to a "Pacific Solution" more or less likely. Some legal commentators [have speculated](#) that the [High Court decision](#) condemning the processing of refugees in Malaysia could make all offshore arrangements unlawful, including those in Nauru and PNG. One refugee advocate has already publicly stated he will [consider taking similar court action](#) on any Manus Island plan. While the back and forth continues in Australia, some islanders have [expressed concern](#) that the court decision will spell the end for the economic benefits that a detention facility would bring.

### **PNG's new leader to tackle education, corruption**

According to a [report in the Papua New Guinea Post Courier](#), the country's new prime minister, Peter O'Neill, has indicated he will call for a supplementary budget of more than 600 million kina (\$265 million US) for the implementation of a free education policy from 2012. [Under the policy](#), the government would pay tuition fees for all students up until Grade 10, with subsidised fees in Grades 11 and 12.

This education funding push forms part of O'Neill's broader policy agenda ahead of

an election slated for June 2012. In addition to strengthening access to education, the new leader vowed to [crack down on corruption](#). Danielle Romanes [writing](#) in the Lowy Interpreter is sceptical, however.

Meanwhile, former Prime Minister Michael Somare has been [released from hospital](#) following a lengthy stay due to heart problems, and is due back in Port Moresby [at the weekend](#).

For the latest economic and political update on the rapidly changing events in PNG, the August 25 Devpolicy forum on PNG with Matthew Morris and Eric Kwa is a must see. The video recording is [here](#).

### **Fiji cancels meeting of Methodist Church leaders**

Fiji's military has reportedly cancelled the annual meeting of the Methodist Church because its leaders were being too political. [The BBC reports](#) that the church, the largest in Fiji, has also been forced to cancel its last three meetings.

Military officers [told the Fiji Sun](#) that the church had "become dysfunctional" after two of its leaders refused to step down from chairing the three day conference. The military also expressed concerns that some church leaders were yet to recognise Frank Bainimarama as the country's leader.

Former church leader Reverend Koroi [alleged \(on Fijian blog Coup Four and a Half\)](#) that military personnel tried to take him away to their barracks during the night – an action which has been denied in a statement by the military forces. However, another former church leader has joined the calls for the [current heads to step down](#), for the sake of the smooth running of future gatherings. New regulations prescribe that the church will [now need to apply for permits](#) to conduct any events.

Following the meeting ban, [anti-regime graffiti has been appearing around Suva](#), despite pleas from the church for its members to avoid participating in any illegal activities.

### **WikiLeaks on the Pacific**

In other bad public relations developments for the Fijian regime, WikiLeaks has also released cables describing its violent crackdowns. The Sydney Morning Herald has [this analysis piece](#) covering both the Methodist church meeting debacle and the details of the US cables.

Australia's efforts to stabilise the Solomon Islands [also came under criticism in leaked cables](#) from the US Embassy in Port Moresby. The blunt assessment? "Despite large-scale Australian assistance and intensive institution building,

Solomon Island democratic institutions clearly cannot cope with the deep fissures and frustrations that divide the many communities in its society.” Further evidence that, for all the talk about transition, RAMSI is going to be in the Solomons for a long time to come.

### Broadband a click closer for Tonga

Tonga has gained support from the World Bank and ADB for a project to bring broadband to the island through an underwater fibre optic cable. During his visit to Australia earlier this month, World Bank Group President Robert B. Zoellick announced support, stating that the project would generate economic and educational opportunities for Tongans living at home and abroad. The ADB has also approved a \$10 million grant for the project.

### In Brief

- Australian Deputy Opposition Leader Julie Bishop has written an op-ed on the important role of Solomon Islands women in the peacebuilding process.
- Canada’s Kwantlen Polytechnic University has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Solomon Islands government that could see the introduction of Canadian academic programs in the country.
- Pacific Island nations now have better access to information to improve their responses to natural hazards.
- A report by the Pacific Islands AIDS Foundation has documented the difficulties faced by Fijian women living with HIV.
- The Cook Islands government is investigating the possibility of a joint aid initiative between China and New Zealand on solar panels.
- PNG landowners will need representation and guidance if proposed changes to the country’s mining laws are introduced, according to Professor Spike Boydell from the University of Sydney.
- Women in Kiribati have been involved in a mock parliament session to encourage their participation in politics.

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Ashlee Betteridge was the Manager of the Development Policy Centre until April 2021. She was previously a Research Officer at the centre from 2013-2017. A former journalist, she holds a Master of Public Policy (Development Policy) from ANU and has development experience in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. She now has her own consultancy, Better Things Consulting, and works across several large projects with managing contractors.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/pacific-buzz-september-2-2011/>