

Climate crisis takes centre stage at the Forum Leaders Meeting

by Kalafi Moala · 5 September 2024



The eventful week of the 53rd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting (PIFLM) concluded on Friday evening with speeches of thanksgiving, gift-giving fit for royals, and a celebration characteristic of Tonga's warm hospitality throughout the week. It was a week of spectacular welcome, with meetings (including several side meetings held simultaneously), hard negotiations, careful handling of thorny issues, and some positive takeaways.

When Tonga's Prime Minister Hu'akavameiliku accepted the Chairmanship of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) for 2024, it came with the responsibility of Tonga hosting the 53rd PIF Leaders Meeting from 26 to 30 August. The declared theme of "Transformative Resilient Pasifiki: Build Better Now" resonated with the leaders throughout Oceania. The theme reaffirmed the importance of "integrated resilience across all Pacific communities and sectors including in the areas of climate change and environmental degradation, building economies through collective solution, building the capacity of Pacific people through innovation and technology, and how health and education challenges are addressed by working together."

The speeches from both the outgoing chairman, Prime Minister of Cook Islands, Hon. Mark Brown, and incoming chairman Hon. Hu'akavameiliku, emphasized that “we need to move on from just policy deliberations to implementation. Policies are action plans that means nothing unless implemented.”

“We must do this now,” Chairman Hu'akavameiliku said. “With our 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and its Implementation Plan now in place, we must now focus on implementation and action.”

“For Tonga this means striving towards a ‘fit for purpose’ regional architecture. It means championing the Pacific Resilience Facility, and other financing arrangements focused on resilience to all our partners—old and new. It means building resilience into our health and education sectors.”

“Implementation” meant there was enough talk about the climate crisis. There also needs to be action on holding developed nations accountable for their scientifically proven contribution to the crisis. The opening day of meetings was marked by rain and flooding in some areas of Tongatapu, as well as a magnitude 6.8 earthquake that highlighted the kind of climate change and disaster risk realities Tonga is experiencing. True to the theme of “Transformative Resilience” and “Building Better Now”, the 53rd PIFLM took note of the weather conditions but continued its deliberations for action!

If there is a significant positive outcome from PIFLM 53, it's the establishment of the Pacific Resilience Facility (PRF). The leaders endorsed Tonga to be the host country. This is not only important for Tonga but also for all the Pacific. The PRF is essentially a fund and management body that will help nations with loss and damage due to climate change, but more so with preventive measures that will mitigate the effects of the climate crisis. It is the first Pacific-led, member-owned and managed and people-centred climate and disaster resilience financing facility.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres made a commitment to Forum Leaders to support the capitalisation of the PRF. Tonga's Minister of Finance, Hon Tiofilusi Tiueti, in a special session on the PRF, said the facility has already received pledges totaling around US\$137 million, including Australia's A\$100 million foundational contribution, US\$20 million from the US and A\$1 million from Nauru. However, he made it clear that much more is needed. “US\$500 million is our initial target, but our goal is US\$1.5 billion for a 1.5-degree world,” he said, citing a phrase coined by the Prime Ministers of Cook Islands and Tonga.

Tonga's hospitable atmosphere and the camaraderie among the leaders made it easier to have a sense of solidarity among the leaders in dealing with regional issues, some quite controversial and contentious. Tackling corruption, for example, was presented as “Pacific Unity Against Corruption”. The sentiment among the leaders and their delegations in Tonga regarding calls for unity was that solidarity was not an end in itself. What are we in solidarity about, it was often asked? Yes, we need to stand together, but what are we standing together for?

There were those in Tonga who demonstrated their disagreement with Japan's release of nuclear wastewater into the Pacific Ocean. They were standing outside the meeting facility with banners and placards demonstrating against the wastewater release. Civil society organisations called on Pacific leaders to prioritise the ongoing disposal of treated nuclear wastewater from Fukushima and the contentious issue of deep-sea mining during their retreat in Vava'u. The call follows a Civil Society Organisation dialogue with Forum leaders in Nuku'alofa, where concerns about these critical issues were strongly voiced.

The concept of an Ocean of Peace was also prominent. The Pacific Policing Initiative (PPI) was discussed, and some positive outcomes agreed on, and left to be ratified in Honiara at the 2025 PIFLM. It was stated in the final communique that "Leaders welcomed Australia's support for the implementation of PPI, including the establishment of a training centre in Brisbane; Papua New Guinea's offer to host Police Officer Training for Members at the Bomana Centre of Excellence; and the expression of interest by the Republic of the Marshall Islands to host a Regional Policing Centre of Excellence, as proposed in the PPI."

For Pacific Island leaders, addressing the turmoil in the French territory of New Caledonia—which has full PIF membership—was among the most pressing issues. A Forum monitoring mission of three Prime Ministers had planned to travel to New Caledonia before PIFLM 53 to contribute to the dialogue in the French Pacific territory. The mission, however, was postponed. The mission will now proceed under new terms after PIFLM 53.

Speaking to Journalists in Nuku'alofa Thursday, France's Ambassador to the Pacific, Veronique Roger-Lacan, confirmed that Paris is ready to welcome the mission to the riot-affected territory. "We came here to reiterate France's state of readiness to welcome this mission, out of information sharing and transparency," said Roger-Lacan. "The mission will be an information mission composed of the 'Troika plus'—the new Troika: Prime Ministers of Cook Islands, Tonga, and Solomon Islands, plus [Fiji] Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka."

With more than 800 businesses damaged and up to 25,000 people out of work, New Caledonia faces economic and social chaos. "Tensions are still high," said Rev. Billy Wetewea, of the Protestant Church of Kanaky, New Caledonia, who was in Tonga, and who has been supporting youth amidst the unrest. "We have lost so much already in terms of life, but also belongings, and a lot of our businesses have been destroyed. The feeling on the ground is that there is no moving back; the way is to move forward," Wetewea said.

On Friday, the final version of the PIF Communique, sent out and published on the PIF website, included the following in Section 66: "Leaders reaffirmed the 1992 Leaders decision on relations with Taiwan/Republic of China". A few hours later, the communique was removed from the website and a new version published which removed the reference. China's special envoy to the Pacific Qian Bo told journalists the previous version was a "mistake". "Surprisingly we also learned there is language concerning (Taiwan and China) this should not be the final communique, there must be a correction on the text," he said.

The alteration of Section 66 raised serious questions about the degree of influence China has on the regional body, said Massey University Associate Professor in security studies Anna Powles. “China’s ability to successfully pressure the Forum to remove Section 66 is a clear wedge strategy with the intention to disrupt and divide. It sends a clear message to the Forum and Taiwan’s remaining Pacific allies that China wields significant influence at the potential expense of regional unity.” Taiwanese influence in the region is diminishing, but three countries in the Pacific—Tuvalu, Marshall Islands and Palau—maintain strong diplomatic ties. Palau president Surangel Whipps Jr said it would fight any proposal to strip Taiwan of its development partner status at the PIF.



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Kalafi Moala established Tonga’s first independent newspaper and currently manages the online platform, Talanoa 'o Tonga.

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