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Statement from Pacific Elders' Voice on the Future of Pacific Regional Security

Pacific peace has never meant simply the absence of conflict. It is the presence of justice, dignity, respect and balance. It is the protection of our people, our ocean, our cultures and the inheritance we leave to future generations. For Pacific peoples, peace is inseparable from sovereignty, stewardship, climate justice and our collective responsibility to one another.

As Pacific Elders, we have witnessed the evolution of Pacific regionalism over many decades. We have seen our institutions at their strongest when they have upheld the equal sovereignty and self-determination of every Pacific nation, strengthened consensus, and placed the collective interests of our Blue Pacific above the competing interests of external powers. Pacific regionalism has never been about surrendering sovereignty. It has been about sovereign nations choosing to act together in pursuit of common purpose.

Today we believe the region stands at an important crossroads.

Increasing geopolitical competition is reshaping the Pacific in ways that demand careful reflection. We are concerned that the vulnerabilities of our peoples, our exposure to climate change, economic dependence, geographic isolation and security challenges, are increasingly being treated as entry points for external influence, reframed as strategic opportunities rather than injustices requiring collective action. Rather than addressing their structural causes, these vulnerabilities are too often used to justify new forms of intervention and security cooperation.

When vulnerability becomes a pathway for external influence, sovereignty itself is diminished. This is not the vision upon which Pacific regionalism was founded. Our regional institutions were created to strengthen the equal sovereignty and self-determination of every Pacific nation through cooperation and shared purpose, not to create new pathways through which power is concentrated, or influence is exercised over the most vulnerable.

The Pacific Islands Forum remains the proper home for collective regional decision-making, but its legitimacy must continually be renewed. Like all institutions, the Forum should continue to evolve to ensure that power is shared more equitably across the region, decision-making is transparent, and all members, regardless of size or geopolitical influence, participate as equal partners. The future of Pacific regionalism cannot be determined by Australia, New Zealand or the larger Pacific states alone. Every member of our Pacific family must have an equal voice in shaping our shared future.

Security governance must remain firmly under the authority of Pacific Leaders and Ministers. Technical officials provide essential expertise, but they cannot replace political leadership or pre-empt the decisions of sovereign governments. We are therefore concerned that bodies such as the Joint Heads of Pacific Security, comprising unelected officials and operating outside the formal Forum governance structure, risk becoming a parallel centre of regional security decision-making. Pacific security must remain genuinely Pacific-led, accountable to Pacific governments and people through institutions

For further information contact:

Mahendra Kumar +679 9252898

Email: pacificeldersvoice@gmail.com

Twitter: @pacificelders

established by Pacific Leaders. This principle should guide the development of new regional security initiatives.

If regional security architecture is to be strengthened, it should do so through the Pacific Islands Forum itself. Just as the Forum's economic governance is anchored through Leaders, Ministers, Officials and formal sub-committees, regional security should follow the same constitutional principle. Any regional security mechanism should be formally located within Forum-agreed processes, supported by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and accountable to Leaders and Ministers. It should not develop as a stand-alone security structure whose authority is unclear or whose direction is shaped outside collective Pacific political oversight. Bodies such as the Joint Heads of Pacific Security should remain technical advisory mechanisms, not permanent pillars of Forum governance.

We are concerned by proposals for a Regional Operations Deployment Framework, advanced under the banner of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief but extending to stability operations, election support and event security. While any regional framework must ultimately be agreed by Pacific governments through Forum processes, we are concerned that key elements and drafting instructions are being developed before Leaders have determined the framework's purpose, governance and accountability. The Boe Declaration calls for flexible and responsive regional architecture. It should not be interpreted as a mandate for a single standing deployment mechanism or for technical processes to run ahead of collective political oversight.

We are equally concerned by proposals for increasingly centralised, intelligence-led and militarised approaches to regional maritime security, including Waqa Moana. Pacific cooperation against transnational crime is essential, but new initiatives must complement—not duplicate or displace—the decades of civilian-led regional cooperation established through the Niue Treaty Subsidiary Agreement, the Forum Fisheries Agency, the Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre and the region's world-leading work on maritime domain awareness and combating illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. These achievements should be strengthened, not overshadowed by approaches that centralise authority, duplicate existing systems, blur the distinction between civilian and military cooperation, or shift control away from Pacific-owned institutions.

Finally, we encourage careful reflection on proposals to further institutionalise or codify the region's emerging security architecture, including through a regional security treaty. Such proposals must be understood in the context of the wider security agenda now developing across the region and alongside our existing legal framework.

The Treaty of Rarotonga was hard won. It stands not simply as a legal instrument, nor as a foundation upon which new security arrangements can automatically be built, but as an enduring expression of Pacific values and our collective commitment to peace. It should be strengthened, not repurposed or weakened through processes that inadvertently constrain Pacific sovereignty or embed security arrangements before their broader implications have been fully considered.

An Ocean of Peace cannot be built on a narrow security agenda. Peace cannot be separated from climate justice or from the forces that produce insecurity in Pacific lives: climate change, fossil fuel dependence, extractive industries, militarisation, nuclear legacies, gendered violence and the denial of self-determination. These are the challenges that any genuine Pacific peace agenda must confront.

The strength of Pacific regionalism has always been that it coordinates the equal sovereignty of its members; it does not replace it. True regional security will never be achieved by concentrating authority or allowing vulnerability to determine whose voice carries greatest weight. It will be achieved by strengthening the capacity of sovereign Pacific nations to act together, as equals, in pursuit of our shared future.

Our concern is not with cooperation. The Pacific has always been strongest when it acts collectively. Our concern is with forms of cooperation that weaken Pacific authority, diminish accountability, or turn vulnerability into permission for external influence.

Our ancestors entrusted us with an ocean that connects rather than divides. Our responsibility is to ensure that our regional institutions continue to reflect that inheritance: genuinely Pacific-led, accountable to Pacific peoples, respectful of the equal sovereignty and self-determination of every member, and committed to justice, peace and the wellbeing of future generations.

The Pacific does not need less sovereignty, nor sovereignty made conditional. It needs sovereign nations working together as equals, through institutions that reflect our shared values, protect our collective interests, and remain accountable to the peoples they serve. That is the enduring promise of Pacific regionalism, and it must remain the foundation of our Ocean of Peace.

Anote Tong, Chair & Former President, Republic of Kiribati

Thomas “Tommy” Remengasau Jr, Former President, Republic of Palau

Hon Enele Sopoaga, Former Prime Minister, Tuvalu

Rt. Hon Bikenibeu Paeniu, Former Prime Minister, Tuvalu

Dame Meg Taylor, Former Secretary-General, Pacific Islands Forum

Professor Robert Underwood, Former Member of U.S. Congress & President, University of Guam

Ambassador Kailopate Tavola, Former Minister and Ambassador, Republic of Fiji

Dr Vijay Naidu, Consultant Professor

Tagaloatele Dr Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop, Professor Emeritus

The *Pacific Elders’ Voice* is an independent group of Pacific people who have been leaders in the region. Our purpose is to provide guidance and advice that will strengthen Pacific resilience to current and future environmental, security, and human rights threats. We provide constructive policy inputs for current and future challenges and opportunities facing the Pacific.

