

Disappointment from Pacific Islands Forum as chair absent

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Heads of government are arriving in the Vanuatu capital, Port Vila, for the Pacific Islands Forum. Australia is the forum's chair, but Prime Minister Julia Gillard has sent the country's foreign minister, Stephen Smith, to stand in as she focuses on the election campaign back home.

The Solomon Islands Prime Minister Derek Sikua is in the same situation. Nonetheless, Ms Gillard's absence is making an impact on other delegates.

Presenter: Geraldine Coutts

Speaker: Sean Dorney, Australia Network's Pacific correspondent in Port Vila

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DORNEY: Well I think there's a bit of disappointment that the prime minister isn't here, I think there's also some queries about how rapidly the chairman of the forum lost his job - Kevin Rudd was deposed just in the last month. But there's also an understanding that when elections are on it's very difficult for leaders to turn up and Derek Sikua, the prime minister of the Solomons is not here because he's at home for the elections there. But I think yes, it's a bit of a difficult situation for Australia at the moment have been chair of the forum for the last 12 months, not to have the leader of the government here.

COUTTS: Do we know who will be representing Fiji at the forum, if they're going to have a delegation outside the forum I mean - they're not members and they've been booted out. But because of the Engaging Fiji meeting I'm just wondering whether the island leaders have enabled them to have some kind of representation unofficially there?

DORNEY: As far as I know no Geraldine, but I arrived here fairly late yesterday myself. I haven't had a chance to scout that sort of information out. But going from what Commodore Bainimarama has been saying since that meeting that he doesn't need the forum, no I don't expect there to be any significant presence here.

COUTTS: The Pacific Institute of Public Policy organised about Vanuatu a forum I take it that you were able to attend last night and you found that quite interesting?

DORNEY: Yes there'd been a number of these public forums run by the Pacific Institute for Public Policy all around the Independence Day celebrations and leading in to the forum, a whole series of them. They're being broadcast live. Last night for two hours there was a broadcast of this 'Vanuatu and the World' discussion that was held, and a very impressive lineup of speakers, including Roy Mickey Joy who's Vanuatu's extremely effective ambassador to the European Union and Donald Kalpokas, a former prime minister. And also the former foreign minister from Fiji, Kaliopate Tavola, who himself spent many years in Brussels which is where Roy Mickey Joy is based now. Quite a bit of the debate was over the

World Trade Organisation and whether Vanuatu should join up, and it was very interesting actually to hear Roy Mickey Joy's discussion on that.

A lot of the discussion was in Bislama, but yes he was basically saying that Vanuatu does need to engage with the world, that you can't ignore the world and that joining the WTO is something that Vanuatu should do. He had some pretty good comments to make about PACER Plus - I'm hoping to chase him up in the next day or so to sit him down and talk to him about that. But Chris Noonan, the trade negotiator for the Pacific islands in those PACER Plus negotiations was in the audience as well. So it was a very interesting discussion.

COUTTS: What is the lineup for today in Vanuatu?

DORNEY: Well in a few hours time the Small Island States of the Pacific Islands Forum will be having their separate pre-forum meeting. The spokesman for that is going to be the president of Palau, Johnson Toribiong. And that meeting we're going to be allowed in to the opening statements but then they'll be meeting separately. Later on there'll be a press conference following that meeting. I don't know if you recall but last year in Cairns it was this meeting that came out very strongly in favour of the Association of Small Island States' position on climate change, but then within a day or two those island states had retreated to adopt a similar position to Australia on climate change. So it's going to be interesting to see what is said at that meeting today.

This afternoon there'll be a meeting of the island countries that have dealings with the European Union, and we'll be expecting a statement to come out over that. But as I said earlier, the launch of the Pacific Islands Forum here in Vanuatu will actually be done tomorrow morning.

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